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(TL NOTE: I'm sorry about my translation notes)

Prologue

I was born in the city I died in. For better or worse, it goes at its own pace, and in this city that hates change, the flow of time remains tranquil. One can call it “peaceful.” Unchanging, it’s not that it can’t change, but rather I don’t think it wants to change in the first place. It has the toughness and straightness of a thigh bone but, as the city lies unchanging, it feels as if the people’s hearts have just stopped. I like this city. However, this feeling of suffocation and stagnation felt as if it’s going to stop my breath. All up until I met “that girl.”

In this city, there is a plethora of old shrines. Such as Nagayame Shrine, Daitou Temple, Tennei Temple and Myouzen Temple. The city has remains of ancient trees that once dominated the

landscape, maple, ash, japanese elm, but now, only a few remain here and there. I had thrown a sideways glance to a building from the reclamation era. That was the building I had once hurried to.

When I walk through the ancient city, it isn't long before a thick green enters my vision. There was a maple tree, a little under 150 years old. Next to it stood a japanese elm of similar age, and in the spring you can see splendid cherry blossoms in full bloom. As if all the trees were to just be packed away, a white mansion had appeared. From the damage of the building, you can easily see that at least 100 years had passed since construction. It's basic motif is wooden, colonial style to be precise. The lining of the white trees contrasts the black framework of the house. With just one glance, it's clear that the house was made with elaborate design in mind. The window protruding from the outward of the wall is impressive. Decorating the entrance is a stained glass window with round diamonds, rubies, pearls, silvers, agate, crystal, coral and lapis lazuli all piled onto the front. Similar buildings of the time are befitting of the modern era. The building gives off an atmosphere of the open sea and peace. Even though it's damaged in many places, it's feels as if it's a miracle this mansion even exists.

Even though the trees seem to flood the area, no one can resist looking at the blinding white. With the owner of this mansion in sight, "Looks like it's a certain somebody." We said in unison. Both of us equally uncomfortable. I saw before me a dangerous beauty.

Crossing under an arch of entangled vines in between the gap of the dandelion and stitchweed, a stone cold face appears facing the side of the garden. If you were to look from the outside, this is a beautiful garden, but the upkeep on the garden doesn't appear to be very well maintained, and the center of the garden is a jumbled up mess. When I continue onward into this garden with spider nests hanging from the tree branches, in an area with just a perfect gap in between the perfectly aged trees where the green shadows do not cover, I find *her* standing there. She is wearing a white shirt reflecting the dazzling sunlight.

She faces her back to me, she appears to not have noticed me, but rather the roots of the cherry blossom tree. She's a bit tall compared to other women, prideful and a firm posture. In addition to all of that, even though she's just standing there, she demands attention. While still looking away, she says, "Hello." Up to when she had noticed me, I think I had been staring at her butt for a little while. I'm an impatient person, so in the end I couldn't hold my tongue and ended up saying something.

"Yo, you ended up coming here? Aren't you a bit late?"

After I said that, she tilted her head towards me, cracked a smile and started laughing, so I thought she was glad to hear my voice. Maybe this smile meant she would lead with something like "You're like the sun," or maybe "You remind me of blooming flowers." I learned the meaning of this smile, this smile that shines like the sun, this smile that reminds me of blooming flowers,

this pretty, innocent, smile that shows she has no care in the world. The innocence of it is cute. It's absolutely more dazzling than the summer sun.

Since she is a rather lady-like figure, I didn't run up to her, instead she tapped her foot lightly on the floor creating an impatient tapping sound. I look like a child that has showed up empty handed to a guest's house. Therefore, I quickly rushed over. It's always me that approaches her.

"I'm sorry for making you wait."

"It's fine, beside that, boy, there's something I want you to help me with."

"Something you want me to help you with?"

"I can't really explain it well"

With saying that, her jaw had raised and she pointed to a spot on the ground. The place she's pointing has a deep red liquid dripping out from a gauze bag resting upon the roots of the cherry blossom tree. The bag looks like something is in it.

"This is…"

When I stepped into the vicinity of the bag, the overwhelming smell of the bag had caused me to turn away. The strong smell of blood has overtaken the corpse. In other words, the body is decaying. I have seen something like this before, so I'm used to it.

"Sakurako-san, could that possibly be…"

"Isn't it amazing? Now, please help me."

Before I could say anything, Sakurako-san had taken my hands then spread them apart and once again, burst out laughing. As always, her laugh is amazing. I don't like being in this kind of situation, but seeing her smile is worth it. So once again, I helped her out.

First Bone: Beautiful Person

That day, as usual I said, “Stop by on the way home.” Being Sakurako-san, she arbitrarily sent me an email with unspeakable demons, so I stopped by her old western-style house after school. No matter how many times I reread the email, it is just as it’s written, no other meaning. I can’t contact her any other way. It’s always like that.

Why? Rather, how come? Well, if I were to not send a reply by mail like usual, and instead were to confront her directly with a phone call, she would yell, “I’m busy right now!” So since I got the email, I have to hurry to her side. I can reject her and not come, but when I think of what would

happen after I do that, I get scared, so it's best if I just go. So even today I said, "Could you please at least write the reason you want me to come?" But as always, she brushed me off and ignored whatever I said. Well, even this is what always happens. This is a so-called "template." If I were to say what I truly thought, even though I have, her selfishness gets in the way, so we have both agreed to just give up trying to break this template.

The place where we live is known as Asahikawa. Even though we're in northern Japan, next to Sendai, we're the core city with the third largest population, and before World War II, we were a big, developing military town. The big attraction of the town is the Asahikawa Mountain Zoo. Thanks to that, throughout all of Hokkaido, we have the second highest tourist count, but until we hit number one, we're just another city. Even if we were to gather up all the tourists, we don't match the glamor of other major Japanese cities. Maybe it's because we get a lot of earthquakes, since we're surrounded on all sides by mountains. Thanks to Biei's Stations and the wooden buildings, there's still buildings from the reclamation period here and there. Although in addition, we don't match the gaudy buildings of other cities, or the massive structures of others. That is the state of this city. If a building is to suffer damages, we just replace it with another of the same. Everywhere in this city, there are signs of deterioration and congestion causing a dull atmosphere to float throughout the city. There aren't many people that try to change that, they just look at the various tourist attractions over and over. Even when the city finally gets it act together and continues the development of the downtown area, that can't even clear this dreary atmosphere. Probably because everyone cherishes the tree stumps that lay around the town. The people of Asahikawa, by nature, hate change.

Even though that's how this place is, it still boasts incredibly rich history. According to the old housekeeper, "When you get cold, then the draft wind must be quite tired huh?" ...Hey. In that old western styled house, Kujou Sakurako-san spent a lot of time with her. So that's what an ojou-sama is. She looks to be in her 20s, late 20s. Always wearing a dress shirt and jeans. I wonder if she ever wears anything else. Her outfits make her look like the type to never crack a joke. Though, you can tell how she feels by the look in her eyes. She's a tall beauty, and her sense of style is also nice. Speaking of height, shockingly enough, despite me being quite tall, our waists are at the same height. Her hair, always slightly frizzy hair, goes down to her shoulders, and it's still its natural color, black. Because of who she is, there's no way she'd get a perm or anything like that. Maybe her hair has been messy since birth. It's not like she has to do anything in particular, if you look at her just as she is, you can see her splendor...That's just the kind of person Sakurako-san is. Although, she has changed quite a lot lately. First of all, she doesn't like humans all that much. Well, that's not completely right, it's more like she has no confidence in the human race. By her nature, she has no interest in things like that. So because of that, she doesn't even have the necessary, essential, tool of communication in the modern age, a cellphone. The things she likes are, firstly, bones. Secondly, bones. Thirdly, bones. Fourthly, bones...and fifthly, bones. Oh, she likes bones. It doesn't matter the type of bone. She loves every single living beings' bones, and she cherishes them dearly.

Her grandpa is a forensics professor, and he taught her, well, he waved his pointer around and used force, brought in tons of different animal corpses from various places for Sakurako-san to examine their skeletons, gave her presents, added various bones to his own collection and sold them online.

In the area where the splendid architecture of the house had expanded into, there lay buried a countless amount of dead animal bodies. Before, when I smelled cooking meat from the kitchen, I thought “They must’ve found some roadkill raccoon. Must’ve taken the bones too,” and that she must be happily cooking up the food in a big pot. Normally, when you boil stuff like this, the smell is horrible, and the housekeeper hated it, but then I heard she started adding soy sauce, causing the smell to disappear. The bigger things and the decomposing things, for those they made a garden to keep away from Sakurako-san. That is, they used strong industrial strength gas burners to boil them. Those things were outside her interests.

When power is put into her hands, she’ll just become a demon that wants to find an animal and strip it down to its white, dried up bones. Then she’ll carefully collect every single last fragment she can, and then using resin or glue, she’ll put it back together. All to make them look pretty in a glass case. Rather than any kind of living, moving being, she locks away things of that nature behind glass. And from the bottom of her heart, she loves people that speaks plainly. This, this is the eccentric person that I had met at that case, but that’s a story for another time. But in the end, ever since I met her, I have been following her.

“So, what shall we do today?”

The neighborhood’s children parents said that there was a monster around (maybe they were a bit shocked by the rumors?) After the old housemaid met them at the door, as always, I lead them into the living room full of Asahikawa designer furniture (we’re a town famed for our furniture.) Sakurako-san sat in her original recliner, crossed her legs and asked questions. In her modern design chair, in this western styled house with a historical feeling, the mood is slightly different, but I understand she likes that chair.

The stoic skeletons of naked bones are works of art compared to the sofa, giving off a novel, drifting air. She speaks sweetly as she says, “Be glad, boy. I thought about getting you a gift.” Her chair shakes, and she smiles.

“...In any case, is that something’s bones?”
“Don’t say it like that. If you sell it online, it has a reasonable value.”
Sakurako-san gives a small pout. Collecting bones is hard work, so many people don’t like it.
“So, what animal is this bone from?”
“A flounder.”
“Flounder?”

I got a bad feeling, and scowled. Actually, several weeks ago, I went fishing with my grandpa’s

company. I had more fun than I thought I would. I lean towards Sakurako-san and say "… Is that the one I caught last month?"

"Hahahahaha, of course. The meat and guts were delicious. You have my thanks."
Sakurako-san was delighted. As we walk through the door, I am presented with a white skeletal specimen. The flounder next to the big, round, black eggs is a remarkable transformation. It's strange seeing the pristine bones of a fish I normally like because it tastes good. It's almost like it's a completely different animal. The bones of a specimen with the name "Pleuronectes obscurus" printed neatly on the wooden frame below it. It would be worth an irresistible amount of money on the market.

"Very... nice. Thanks for always showing me."
Some people might like getting a skeleton as a present, but I, for one, don't like handling such troublesome things. The flounder would normally be an edible fish, but this modified form Sakurako-san gave it almost looks scary. The whole room is decorated with bones, but I feel like it is in bad taste.

"However… If you decorate a room like that, won't other people be surprised? You know not everyone is used to it, right?"
"Surprisingly. Isn't it beautiful, though? What's wrong with fish bones? In addition, don't you know fish bones take a lot of work?"

With that said, Sakurako-san starts giving me an explanation about how hard it is to make a skeletal specimen of a fish. She doesn't realize I'm trying to withdraw from the conversation. Other animals can be buried in the ground, or simmered in a pot, but it seems that fish are different, apparently.

"Over hot water, carefully drop it with a toothpick and chopsticks," she says, stoically.
I can't imagine how stiff my shoulders would get working on something so delicate. I wouldn't want to deal with that… Why can't Sakurako-san just eat it normally?
"Aren't they beautiful, too? Even with their flat, funny outward appearance, you have to think that they're still delicate."
"Right…"
I saw her eyes sparkle cunningly, as if to say "cheer up".

Due to my personality, I don't feel troubled by her. When I tell others about her, though, I say she isn't very good at communicating.
"Oh dear, certainly… it may be beautiful."

Regardless of whether or not I think it's beautiful, it's be troublesome if I put her in a bad mood. It's not that I can't understand her, she just talks so flatly that it's ridiculous.
The same flounder, that I usually only think about eating, looked almost like a leaf, with its bones laid out like the veins of one. I looked over at something else, and noticed the bones

looked like a peacock and it's feathers, even though there were no signs to label it as such. Although I usually wouldn't usually say bones are beautiful, there is something nice about their delicacy. I guess that's all I can understand as someone who isn't interested in bones. So, after all, I should do some "adult correspondence" here.

"I'm happy. Thank you very much. Well then, I will put it on top of the desk."
I remember when the fishermen handed me the fish to put in my bag.
"If it's the bones, I like okoze. That fish has a very charming face. Unfortunately, I have never assembled one."
Sakurako-san sat back in her chair, while smiling, and contently says, "Okoze… I wonder if there aren't any in Hokkaido?"
(TL NOTE: Okoze is a stonefish that is eaten as sashimi, after the poisonous parts are cut out.)
"Is that so?"
"The fish was thought to live in relatively warm places."

At least I haven't seen one of those on the dining table yet. Sakurako-san seems a bit down, so I start thinking for a while.

"Well… How about a sailfin poacher instead?"
"Sailfin poacher?"
"It is delicious to eat, but there are a lot of bones. Isn't it an odd shape? They also have fins like wings, and I think that it is interesting, but ... "

Sakurako-san gives me a funny look as I showed her a picture of a sailfin poacher with my smartphone. She looks puzzled at first when she looks at my smartphone, but her face brightens up quickly.

"This is bizarre!"

Sakurako-san's face softens, and she laughs while staring at my phone. I feel relieved, and reach for the fresh tea that's on the table. Gran, who is being treated as a monster by neighbouring children. I wonder why sometimes the way she moves around makes her feel like she isn't human?

It makes me feel uneasy. Unlike a monster, though, the tea gran brews me is always delicious. I don't normally drink black tea, so I don't know the differences between different tea leaves, but I do know that it's far more delicious than the tea my mom brews. Until I met Sakurako-san, I didn't know tea could be so delicious.
"Well, if you ever go fishing, bring what you catch here."

The delicious tea, along with Sakurako-san's innocent smile is nice.
"I appreciate it. Your hobby of fishing really saved me."

When Sakurako-san lifts her face, she's smiling, which makes me happy, too. It's now that I realize how much she puts me through.

I truly am an idiot. I know that it will be troublesome, but I want to have more in common with Sakurako-san.

"Actually, it's my grandpa's hobby, not mine."

There was no point in explaining further. I swallow a sigh that I almost let spill out, and I force a smile.
I don't know how to catch sailfin poachers, but if I asked my grandpa, he'd tell me a story about them and take me fishing with him. My grandpa would be very pleased with such a request from me, and it kills two birds with one stone if it becomes a grandpa's filial piety.

Like a child receiving a toy, Sakurako-san innocently touches my smartphone, while I drink my tea. Sakurako-san and the "monster", gran, being the only residents, the estate is always wrapped up in a solemn silence. Though I must say, this estate has a lot of charm. The entrance is decorated with white bones, as if to watch over the house. It used to give me a bad feeling, but now I don't mind as much. It's probably the result of Sakurako-san's influence.

While listening to Sakurako-san's delightful sighing sound in such a pleasant silence, suddenly, in her hands, my smartphone began to play the new song from a popular idol group.

"Sorry, I just wanted to see the phone." She says, pleased. Even songs you like are a bit uncomfortable to listen to here. I felt kind of like I was doing something bad. Sakurako-san has a look of confusion and dissatisfaction, as I received a phone call from my mother. Why is my mother's timing always so bad? I pout.

"Yes" I answer, angrily.
I hear my mom say "What?" in a displeased voice.
"No, nothing. So then, what's wrong? Did you forget to buy ingredients for dinner?"
"You're wrong. I just need some help with something. Hurry home, soon."
"Whaaaat…"

I suddenly realize that maybe I've gotten used to how overbearing my mother is because of how overbearing Sakurako-san is.

When I was four years old, my father died of an illness. Since then, my mother raised me and my older brother alone. She's a very capable person. My mother started managing apartments with my father's insurance money, and now she manages eight properties in the city. Even though she is a single parent, I really respect her for never making me feel like we didn't have enough money.

Even now that I'm in high school, I can attend private school, and go to whatever university that I want to, which is different from what my mother had when she was my age. She's a nice person, but the errands she gives are rough. She always makes me work like a slave for free (at least if you do manual labour you get a little pocket money). Also, she's been increasing her demand for chores since my brother left home last year.

"Do you need help with… packing, or something? I can help in two hours."

Cooking has become my specialty, I answer my mother on the phone while noticing the scent of cooking oil and ginger in the kitchen. I haven't eaten lunch yet because I was being lectured all morning. When I was greeted at the door, gran gladly asked me "Have you eaten lunch yet, young master?" so I was a bit relieved I didn't have to worry about it.

Gran always says I'm "looking thin", and has a strong desire to feed me delicious food. Gran always serves tea cakes, but today there is only tea. I have a feeling I know the reason. I hear Sakurako-san is often scolded. "You can't eat sweets before lunch." If you do, gran's delicious lunch might go to waste.

I don't say anything, but my mom doesn't like cooking, and she isn't very good at it. I don't even bring my own lunches for school, even though I'm in high school. My lunch won't be prepared when I go home. Although I could make some instant ramen, it's much more delicious if gran makes lunch. My mom gives me so many errands, I want to at least have a nice lunch sometimes…

"Come home by 1:30."
"1:30? So soon?"
I looked at the old wall clock, it's 12:55 right now.
"Strangely, one of the tenants can't be contacted, so a family member says they want me to open the door. Do you think something bad happened? You should come, too."
"Whaaat…" My voice surely sounds very dissatisfied.
"Anyway, I'm out of time. Come home ASAP."
Bzzt.
Sakurako-san only heard one side of the conversation.
"Geez…"
I let out a grand sigh, and Sakurako-san narrows her eyes at me.

"That was my mother."
"What did she want?" Sakurako-san asks.
"In one of the apartments my mother manages, a tenant's family contacted her because they want the room opened up."
"I see."
"Last time my mother had to open a door like this, an old man was dead inside... So she

probably doesn't want to do it alone this time."
I'm not really interested. I drop my shoulders while responding, and Sakurako-san strikes my thigh.
"I see, let's go."
"Wha-?"
"You're saying the tenant might be dead, right? We should definitely go!"
The look on her face was filled with hopeful expectations, I raise my eyebrows.
"Sakurako-san…"
"What?"
Surely I'm not wrong in finding that offensive.
"That's too unscrupulous"

Sakurako-san pouts at my reluctance. She doesn't act like she's older than me. Gran must have a hard time dealing with her every day.
"If you keep enjoying the misfortune of other people, something bad will happen to you, eventually."
In such a situation where someone truly may have died, I couldn't take her along with me. I told Sakurako-san, who is acting like a child, "You'll be staying home, today."
"It's not like I'm particularly enjoying this. I don't get to see human corpses very often, so it's just intellectual curiosity."

Sakurako-san shakes her head and stands firm against me. She was lying when she said she wasn't enjoying this.
"I told you no," I say clearly.
"Boy, don't try to get in my way."
So she was lying. She wouldn't be so insistent if she wasn't enjoying this.
"If there's anything there, I'll tell you about it. Please wait here… oops."

While I was talking to her, I pulled the muffler out of my bag, and almost knocked over the black flounder specimen. I sigh in relief after I check to see if any of the bones in the case broke from the impact. Sakurako-san grabs my shoulder from behind and whispers in my ear.

"S-Sakurako-san?!"
"So, are you really saying you won't take me with you? What about if the person inside has been dead for several days, already? Bodies decompose faster in the summertime. Decomposition probably started a while ago for this person. You must be aware of that."
Her low voice, and tickling breath send a cold shiver up my spine.

"For example, a bathtub. Let's say they died of heart failure while bathing. I'm sure you already know what happens to a corpse that has been submerged in water, right?"
Sakurako-san's words reminded me of when we found a corpse near a river. It's a memory I had pushed to the back of my mind, and didn't wish to remember.
"Bathrooms are often cold, so it wouldn't be unusual for the person to be keeping the water

heated. It will be easy to take the bones from a body that has been cooking for several days. But the smell--“
“Please stop!”

Sakurako-san takes the skeletal specimen from me after I shout.
“I’m merely stating the facts. I’m just asking if when the time comes, will you be able to look at the body yourself?”
“…”

Sakurako-san picks up my bag, and puts my textbooks on the table. She carefully refills it with skeletal specimens, and closes the fasteners.
“Now, are you ready to go?”
We start to leave in silence, while Sakurako-san wraps a fluffy muffler around my neck.

“… Like a cat, it’s hard to know if it’s dead.”
Curiosity killed the cat
Curiosity killed Sakurako
Even a cat with nine lives in a legend would destroy himself with curiosity, so even Sakurako-san might be killed by it. I don’t dislike Sakurako-san, but I do dislike her attitude towards death, but I bite my lip.

“A cat? Cats are very beautiful animals when they are alive but their bones are quite artistic. I used to—"
“Enough already! I was wrong!”
Bang! Gran, who is standing behind us, hit the table loudly. Sakurako-san gave a small yelp.
“Ah, sorry.”
“Now! Young master, it’s already time to go home!”
“Excuse me, some urgent business came up…”

I can smell pot-au-feu and ginger pork, and see them on the tray. My stomach growls, but I helplessly bow to gran. I want to eat the food she made, but I’m sorry, gran.
“I’m also leaving.”
“Are you going out, too? Well, let’s prepare, then. Going out like that isn’t appropriate for a lady of the Kujo family.”
“I have to leave right now! My family will be mad at me if I’m not there by 1:30!”

Gran seems confused, and Sakurako-san left to change clothes. I decide to head out, so I can get there first.
“No, that’s fine.”
Sakurako-san says “It can’t be helped”, so I grab my coat and leave.
“I’m sorry about that, gran!”
After I apologize to gran, who looks like she is about to cry in the entranceway, I leave with Sakurako-san.

“Well, I will return soon.”
Hahaha, Sakurako-san is laughing as usual. I really, truly owe gran an apology. The pain in my chest won’t go away until I do.
“So, then, where are we going?”
When we get out on the street, Sakurako-san spreads her hands and laughs – oh yeah. I guess she’s coming with me. I notice again that I have been swayed by her into several hours of dizziness and melancholy. Even though she says she’s an adult, she doesn’t act like it.
“Ah, geez, this isn’t much of a twist…”
I let out a deep sigh from my abdomen, and mutter a curse at Sakurako-san’s triumphant step.

Part two

It would take 10-odd minutes to get to the apartment from Sakurako-san’s house by car. I planned to go by bus, but I noticed that the taxi that is just in front of the house was empty, Sakurako stopped the taxi at once.

Since I got here early, I am able to eat some rice balls from a convenience store near the apartment for lunch. The flavours are walleye pollack roe, tuna mayo, and plum. The walleye pollack roe is barely spicy, the tuna mayo is way too salty, and the plum lacks any sourness at all. I hate to think some people think this is delicious. I’d much rather have gran’s ginger pork that I love so much for lunch. Nevertheless, I’m full, regardless of how it tastes.

After I finish eating my rice balls, and drink my tea, my mother appears. Although I’m wearing my fashionable poncho coat, I still have to dress warmly, since it’s so cold in Asahikawa. My clothes are so thick I look like a daruma doll. My mother looks a bit disappointed.

“You’re here!”
My mother covered her mouth with her hand, and I feel like I have to face her. While trying to think of what to say, I decide to just try to introduce Sakurako-san.

“Umm, mother, this is—”
“I already know! Who doesn’t know the daughter of the Kujo family?”
My mother drags me a little ways away, lowers her voice, and pokes my side.

“Huh? You know her?”
"Naturally. The area around the Nanko District where we live was originally borrowing the land of the Kujo family. They’ve been famous landowners since after the Second World War.”
“Well… I know she has a big house.”

Sakurako-san's house is big, for sure. She says it's 10 rooms, even though it's only her and gran that live there. The garden is so big that it's no surprise that there's two dolphins and minke whales, one brown bear, three deer and horses, with plenty of room to spare.

"It seems that the head of the household was sorting something out before his death, so the house isn't as nice as it used to be. If you're talking about Kujo-san, she's a fine lady."
"Oh…"
"Don't 'oh' me! Why did you bring someone like that with you?"
"I didn't bring her, she insisted on coming with me."
"Huh?"
Sakurako-san starts watching us, she probably thinks it's strange that we're talking quietly.

"Well… For now, don't mind Sakurako-san. She's fine." I said
"I don't mind, but there was no reason for her to come!" Mother said.
"It's fine, leave it alone. Sakurako-san will do whatever she wants, I can't control her. She really is like a child."
"I can hear you, boy." Sakurako-san says without looking at me, while staring through the apartment window. Usually, people rent out second-hand properties, instead of building a new building. The apartments my mother manages are no different. They have no personality, but give off a somewhat impressive feel.

"Hahahaha… you heard?"
"Your judgement isn't wrong, but don't act like I can't hear you." Sakurako-san said.
My mother seems like she is in a hurry.
"Ah… it's so cold here, we need tea."
Sakurako-san is staring, and pointing out a café to my mother. She casually gestures toward it.
"Don't worry."

But Sakurako-san grabs my arm tightly. My mother gives me a bewildered backward glance, and Sakurako-san drags me away.

"How long are we going to keep waiting? Let's go."
"No, we have to wait for the family, first. We've decided not to open the door without permission."
"Unacceptable. Where's the room?"
Sakurako-san is stomping her foot like a rabbit. I hurry to ask my mother "Where is the room?"
"Ah, the first room on the second floor. Mizushima-san is a young lady."
"Huh?"

With a klunk, I feel like my head and gut are hit with something hard.
"Mizushima-san…?"
"Well, she will get married soon, so she told me she's planning to move out, but I hope I'm not

strange in ...”
“No way…”
I thought she was going to be elderly, but the tenant is a young lady. And Mizushima-san?
“Moving is hard on the whole family.”
“R… right…”

That’s right, everyone has troubles. This is surely the Mizushima-san I’m acquainted with. Of course when you’re not acquaintances, this kind of thing is surprising, but when you are acquainted, the shock is even bigger. No way, I don’t want to think about Mizushima-san being in trouble.

“Surely that’s impossible…”
My fingers started to tremble as I remembered her clean, slender appearance.
“On the second floor… over there? The curtains are pulled.”
“That’s right.”
“There’s no reason for the room to be dark at this time. Either she didn’t open them after last night, or she died during the night and couldn’t open them.”
“Please stop saying things like that!”

Sakurako-san sighs at my outburst.
“Kujo-san, a lady shouldn’t sigh like that.”
I grabbed my mother’s shoulder to prevent the situation from getting worse.
“Besides that, isn’t it already past 1:30? Where is her family? They aren’t here yet?”
“I think it’s about time…”
“I can ask them by phone!”
“They might not pick up…”
“Boy”
“Yes?”

Suddenly, Sakurako-san points at something she sees. In the direction she is pointing, I see the shape of a person run across the road. The person seems to have noticed us, and they quickened their pace. A woman in a white down coat trotted up to us, while trying to warm up her hands. She is about 160cm tall, and quite fashionable. She has pale skin, and bright orange blush, making a gorgeous impression. She also has short, loosely wavy hair.

“Um… are you the landlady?” she asks.
“Yes. I’m Tabawaki, the one who manages this building.”

With my mother’s answer, the woman hurriedly fixes the collar of her coat. Under her coat, it seems she has a pink and white shirt. Her pants don’t look warm enough. It makes me cold just looking at them.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

She lowers her head when she arrives in front of us. I check the name tag on her coat, it says “Mizushima”. She raises her head, and I smell her slightly sweet perfume.

“Umm, are you Mizushima-san’s family?”
“Yes. I am Yoshimi, her younger sister. My mother wanted to accompany me the day before yesterday, but she fell and hurt her back.”
“Ah, the road was quite icy the day before yesterday.”
My mother seems worried that she’ll have to check her identity in advance before she can open the room.

“Is this licence okay?”
“Yes, if it lets me confirm your full name and photograph.”
She pulls a brand-name wallet out of her coat pocket. She takes out her licence with cold hands.
“Mizushima… Yoshimi-san. Yes, I’m sure.”
“Is this alright?”
“Can I also ask your mother’s name?”
“My mother’s? Mizushima Miyoko, it’s…”
“’Mi’ from beautiful, ‘yo’ from era, and ‘ko’ from child, right?” (TL NOTE: the meaning of each symbol in her name)
“Yes.”
“I’m sorry, I just wanted to confirm the name of the person who signed the contract.”
“Yeah…”

In every case, my mother has to carefully check people’s identities. Yoshimi-san went to check the room as soon as possible, and flutters up to the second floor. Unsure of her feelings, she begins to confirm the documents with my mother. I am frustrated with my mother, who is giving Yoshimi-san a document while saying “I want to write a letter of agreement…” I understood Yoshimi-san’s anxiety.

“An ophthalmologist?”
Sakurako-san asks abruptly.
“Yes?” Yoshimi-san says.
My mother hands her a ballpoint pen, and Sakurako-san’s eyes twinkle with wonder.

“You must work at a hospital.”
“Why do you ask?”
“Those shoes you’re wearing are from a nearby hospital.”
Sakurako-san tells her, while looking at her red crocs.

Even though it isn’t snowing, crocs aren’t really shoes you should wear in this weather.
“When I came here in a taxi, I saw two hospitals nearby. Medical department of pediatrics and

ophthalmology. Pink coats are often worn by paediatric nurses, so I assumed."
Sakurako-san taps next to her eyes with her index finger.

"…"
"It's around the eyes. There's a round line near your eyes."
While signing the documents, Yoshimi-san's face turned into a grimace.
"Perhaps it is a mark of a laser flare cell meter. The ophthalmologist nurses have to look after the machine more than the patient. News that a new nurse was being transferred to the eye department leaked out." Sakurako-san continues.

"That is… sure that may be the case. At the start, I was very confused."
Yoshimi-san finishes signing the documents and lets out a sigh, then gave an insincere smile. I wonder what Sakurako-san is thinking.

"Yeah, she is an ophthalmology nurse!"
Reading the mood, my mother raised her voice.
"Yes… there's an eye clinic…"

Yoshimi-san nods, while my mother exaggeratedly tells Sakurako-san "That was awesome!", but Sakurako-san disregards it. She doesn't really care who admires her.

However, since the truth is hidden there, I want to find it. Sakurako-san had heard the words from from her uncle, who she respects.
"The truth is like a bone. Even though it is hidden in skin, fat, and flesh, the bones support all of it. Everything is supported by reason. Living things are built of bone and muscle."
That's why Sakurako wants to know. Because she loves bones. Just like tearing off a piece of an animal's flesh, she can't help but look for the truth.

"Well then, shall we go?"
Sakurako-san does not seem pleased that my mother ignored her, and is a little angry.
Still, Sakurako-san is a necessary companion to my mother, "Well then, we have a job to do. Kujo-san should be finishing her coffee soon."
"Let's head to the second floor."
Sakurako-san frowns when she catches sight of my mother, and is the first to start climbing the apartment stairs. Soon Yoshimi-san, mother, and I start following behind.
"Here, in front."

We arrive on the second floor, and Sakurako-san stands in front of the second door in the middle and gave a nod. There is no nameplate on the door, but Mizushima-san's room is the room on the left side. Sakurako-san reaches for the handle with her black leather gloves.
"It's still locked."

Sakurako-san tries to turn the doorknob to confirm, but is met with a hard sound. Yoshimi-san makes a puzzled expression, as if to say “why is she going first?”

“Can you really not contact her?” I ask, in an attempt to change the atmosphere.
“That’s right. I tried calling and emailing her.”
“Does she usually respond?” Sakurako-san interjects.
“She keeps in touch with my fiancé every day.”
“Is he the only one she talks to every day?”
“It’s normal. We don’t care for each other more than what happened at work after it ends, or what you had for dinner last night.”
“Hahahaha!”

Sakurako-san suddenly laughs loudly. I look at her, frustrated, because I want an explanation. Is that normal? I want to say something. Surely she feels something for her sister.
“Sakurako-san.”

Nevertheless, Sakurako-san apparently found Yoshimi-san so ridiculous that she had to laugh. I pulled up the sleeve of my coat so I could scold Sakurako-san, but she just gave me a sarcastic grin.

“So are you saying ‘雪こそば春日消ゆらめ心さへ消え失せたれや言も通はぬ’?”
(TL NOTE: this is a poem from the 1700s that was too hard to translate. It’s something like “snow will melt into a spring day, but if you melt from my heart, I won’t be able to see you” or something.)
“Huh?”
“That is normal. Before I knew it, the words ‘Heisei’ were replaced by ‘Heian’.”
(TL NOTE: The Heisei era is the current era in Japan, the Heian era was in 794-1185)
Sakurako-san says while laughing in the back of her throat.
Yoshimi-san, not knowing what to say, looks at me for help. I don’t know what to say, either, but I don’t want Sakurako-san to make a fool out of Yoshimi-san. Sakurako-san is always like this…

“… Anyways, how to open the door”
We had better open the door before Sakurako-san hurts anyone else, so I ask my mother for the key.
“I think she wants to go think by herself for a little bit. You often hear about it, marriage blues.”
“…”

Mizushima-san had told me that her marriage was close, but she had a somewhat clouded facial expression, and didn’t respond. I know her older sister well. But marriage and sisters are different things.

I have a close relationship with my older brother, but I have things my brother doesn’t know, and surely my brother has things I don’t know. Maybe it’s just Sakurako-san, but not being able to

contact someone close to you usually leads to incidents and unhappiness, doesn't it? While thinking about such things, I open the door with the key. It should be fine to open the door…
Yoshimi-san takes a deep breath and opens the door.
Gachunk.
As the metallic sound reverberates, the door stops.
"-ah"
"The chain is on…"
Sakurako-san raises her eyebrows. Yoshimi-san and I look at each other quickly, and go pale.

"Oh, that's a problem." Mother says in a laid back tone.
Apparently my mother doesn't understand the problem with the door being chained.
"… What should we do? How do we open it?"
Even I know it's a stupid question.

"… Please."
"Well… we're going to end up with a broken chain. I wonder how much it will cost to repair?"
My mother seems a bit troubled while saying that, so I hurry to grab her arm.
"What?"
I grab my dissatisfied mother's arm, and lead her down the stairs.
"Think about it! It's just a chain, and there's a person inside!"
"I don't want to do this!"

It seems my mother doesn't realize the size of the situation. The chain is the one thing keeping us from opening the door. But there is someone inside. Not even just Mizushima-san, there was no sign of any person moving in this room. Mother hurriedly pulls out a toolbox from the rear seat in her car.

"Hey… I'd like to ask..."
While I hand my mom a tool, she looks unhappy, and frustrated. It's not a fun job, but I know it's the only thing we can do. As I go upstairs to return to Sakurako-san, I see Yoshimi-san shaking terribly in place. Apparently, Sakurako-san said something a bit too much. I feel sorry for Yoshimi-san, I don't know if leaving those two alone was a good idea, but what I have to do now is cut the chain.

"I think it will break after this."
"Please." Yoshimi-san says, while bowing her head.

In that request, I could feel that she wants to go inside. I grip my hands a few times, and take a deep breath. The mysterious feeling the doorknob gave off makes me nervous and uneasy, it almost feels unreal, but I can't just leave. I don't know if this will have to be left to the police, only the situation will tell. I have no choice but to give it my best here.

“…”
I slowly open the door just a bit. As expected, I don’t hear any noise from the room. I am driven by the desire to run away, and I pick up the chain with shaky hands. As I try to pick up the line, I suddenly feel Sakurako-san’s body heat against my back.

“Well, Sakurako-san?”
“Once it’s open, we should go in first.”
Sakurako-san starts secretly whispering in my ear.
“Huh?”
“I smell something. If you don’t want to regret anything, let me go first.”
“Smell…?”

Before I can answer, Sakurako-san starts to leave me.
As I say that, I start to feel uneasy. I sniff the room, but the only odour in the entranceway I could smell is the fragrance of sweet lavender that is a bit choking.

“…”
I cannot afford to be swayed by Sakurako-san anymore. I decide to try to concentrate on my current work as much as possible. It’s not a difficult job, but it takes some strength. I take a deep breath, and grip my hands tightly to try to calm down.

Mother is stares at Sakurako-san and Yoshimi-san’s backs, and clenches her hand.
The chain, of course, was hard and could not be cut easily, but it can be cut if you use enough strength. I clench my teeth, and strengthen myself to put all my weight on the chain, causing it to bow. Sakurako-san enters the door in no time at all.

“Sakurako-san!”

I try to stop her, but she ignores me while I try to quickly take my shoes off. It can’t be helped – I sigh and turn to a surprised Yoshimi-san.

“Umm… do you mind if I go in first…?”
“…”
“If you find something, there will be trouble… Umm, I won’t touch anything inside!”
Although I thought it was an absurd suggestion, Yoshimi-san nods.
“Please go ahead.”
“Huh?”
With that, Yoshimi-san nodded once more.
Rather than nodding, usually you would bow your head.

“Is that… okay?”
“It’s alright, please.”
“But...”

I am filled with confusion, but I could sense that she resigned herself from something. You wouldn’t want to see a family member like that…

“Everything will be okay...” Yoshimi-san looks like she’s about to cry, but she nods twice with a red face. Even I thought my comforting wasn’t very good, but I want to believe myself.
“Well then… Excuse me, I’m going in.”

I bow to Yoshimi-san before entering. I can smell lavender while I take my shoes off.
Sakurako-san is already inside the room.

The entranceway is tidied up beautifully, and there’s not a single pair of misplaced shoes, other than ours.
“Huh…”
Even with Sakurako-san going first, I am still surprised at the state of the room. I look into the living room through the half opened door. I accidentally let out a small “This is… terrible.” Even with the curtain closed, and the electricity on, the living room is in a truly miserable state.

--it is devastated.
I thought that immediately.

Of course it isn’t because of Sakurako-san. Sakurako-san, who didn’t make so much as a sound, couldn’t possibly make such a mess in a short amount of time. That’s why I think the room was messed up before we got here. The living room that should be beautiful is so cluttered that I can’t see anything.

A broken glass, a fallen houseplant, a ripped magazine, a collapsed TV, a medicine box with a lid opened - It’s in such rough condition that it really seems like a small tornado went through the room.

I carefully chase Sakurako-san, who has already left the living room, trying not to step on anything. I feel like a thief, going through someone’s property. I feel like it’s in bad taste, but we had to do something.

On the front cover of the magazine is the writing “How to make homemade jam!”, there seems to be a carefully decorated album (I learned later that it was scrap booking), a specialty store tea bag, empty boxes from natural leisure shops in the U.K. that were mailed out…
Mizushima-san’s room is nicely decorated.

“Sakurako-san, this seems bad…”
Apparently Sakurako-san went to the bedroom. I notice pink underwear falling off the sofa, and look away.

“Where are you?”
“Boy, over here.”

I can feel my cheeks getting hot as I look around the room. The response came from the back, so I ask more questions in the direction of the voice. Eventually I can see Sakurako-san’s jeans through the gap in the halfway open door.

“Don’t touch anything in this room.”

I lean against the half open door and ask Sakurako-san, who is crouched down in front of the bed.
“Sakurako-san…”
“….”

Instead of replying, she takes off her leather gloves, and puts on disposable, thin plastic gloves from her pocket. She slaps the glove against her wrist.
“Sakurako-san?!”

I freeze in place. A sight I didn’t want to see jumped into my eyes.
“This…”
Why? I can’t speak. There was no way I could be prepared for the reality of the situation.

“That’s…. not…. right…”

My knees start shaking and grow weak. When I fall to my knees on the floor, I am met with the slight scent ammonia and the smell of a dead body.

“Is this woman the tenant?”

I press on my mouth and nod many times. At Sakurako-san’s feet, there is Mizushima-san, whose upper body is falling off the bed.

“It doesn’t smell too much, yet. If it wasn’t for the scent of ammonia, I wouldn’t have even noticed.”
“Wha…”

This sight makes me want to doubt my own eyes. With her tongue out, and her eyes wide open, Mizushima-san has an expression of agony.

That beautiful Mizushima-san. That white fingertip, which is smooth and slender, is discoloured to blue and black. From her roughly disturbed chest, I can see the skin protruding. I am shocked by the colour of her skin that turned pale and completely discoloured.

“Uuugh…”

At the same time I am feeling sadness, there is also a burning sensation in my heart.

It’s fear, anger, and disgust. My eyes start to tear up, while a feeling that I’m about to vomit rises from my stomach. All I can think of was why.
When close friends, or loved ones die abruptly, it causes sad and unbearable fear, and stabbing physical aversion. I react with sadness and frustration, it makes me unhappy, and I cover my face and push my forehead against the bed. I’m terribly scared, and I don’t want to think about what she looked like in her final moments. As I shut my eyes, her wide eyes become distinctly burned into my mind. I’m sure I will never forget that sight.

“Hmm. There seems to be postmortem lividity. Is this a sunny room?” Sakurako-san asks.
“No… I don’t think that’s the reason…”
“There seems to cloudiness in the corneas, but it’s not as dry as I was expecting. The pupils are still dilated.”

Again, Sakurako-san’s gloves make a slap sound. Perhaps she took them off.

“I see. It’s still stiff, and the abdomen still has changed colours. From the temperature of this place, she probably died within the last twenty four hours.” Sakurako-san says happily as I lift my head.

I think the fact that Sakurako-san can find enjoyment in something like human death is terrible from the bottom of my heart.

“Big sister!!” I hear someone shout from behind me.
“Ah, why! Big sister! Ah!” I forgot… Yoshimi-san is still here...
“No way… Big sister! You were so lively the day before yesterday!” After seeing her sister, Yoshimi-san rushes over, and sits down beside the bed.

“This is absurd, messed up… What does this mean? What happened? Older sister!” With her voice quivering, Yoshimi-san breaks down crying, clinging to Mizushima-san's dead body. I feel terrible and remorseful. Even though we both saw the same “death”, I wish I could have made it a bit easier for Yoshimi-san… Ah, I’m an idiot.

“What… What should I do?” Yoshimi-san gently brushes away Mizushima-san’s bangs, and cries.

“You should call the police.” Sakurako-san says.
“Huh..?”
“I mean, with a corpse rolling around here, we should call the police.”
“Rolling…” It doesn’t matter how she says it, Yoshimi-san’s voice sounds angry.
“Sakurako-san!”

The same thing came to my head. I am out of patience, and about to yell at Sakurako-san. Sakurako-san seems a bit surprised, and raises her eyebrows while I glare at her. I know Sakurako-san doesn’t intend to be cruel, but she comes off that way.

“… Um, well, first of all we should contact the police.”
“Umm… we probably shouldn’t touch the things in Mizushi- Kiyomi-san’s room too much.”
Anyway, what we have to do right now is call the police, in this situation.

Since Yoshimi-san is also “Mizushima-san”, I call her by her first name for the first time. Kiyo for coast, mi for beautiful. (TL NOTE: the Japanese spelling of her name) I always thought her name was perfect for her, but now I’m about to cry that this is the first time I get to call her by such a lovely name.

“… What do you mean?” Yoshimi-san asks.
“It’s just that… The room is so devastated. There may have been some kind of crime here…”
“-Are you saying my big sister might have been killed?”
“I think the possibility is there.”
“Why! I don’t get it! Big sister!?”

No person should ever have to be involved in a crime. I think it’s natural for Yoshimi-san to think so. But only terrible people are involved in crime. The sad reality is that no matter how cleanly a person lives, they could suddenly lose their life to a complete stranger, and it’s surely happening again somewhere else right now. Death is always around us, but it’s invisible.

“Doctor…?” I suddenly hear the voice of my mother and someone talking about something in front of the entrance. Without thinking, Yoshimi-san gets up.
“Yoshimi-kun… what on earth happened?” While saying this, a man wearing a coat similar to Yoshimi-san’s came into the room, and seems surprised by the state of the room.
“Doctor! It’s big sister!”

As he approaches the middle of the living room, Yoshimi-san lets out a loud cry and runs towards him. It’s such a heartbreaking cry that it feels like it could suck out my soul, as she lets out all the patience she had until now.

“… What on earth, what happened…”
“Ah, this person is Mizushima-san’s fiancé” My mother is never going to come into the room, she just stands and watches Yoshimi-san cry.

While she's thinking about how pitiable Yoshimi-san is, she's probably also worrying about how difficult it will be to rent out this room later. The man is puzzled by Yoshimi-san's crying, but is gently stroking her back to comfort her, and he bows to us.

"I'm Hashiguchi. I'm currently an ophthalmologist. I'm Kiyomi's fiancé."
"Yeah…"

Hashiguchi is a young man, who seems a little older than Kiyomi-san. He seems like a good person, with a sense of cleanliness, though his pink tie under his white robe is a bit flashy, unlike Kiyomi. I don't know how to say it, but I'm not really disappointed that he won't be able to marry Kiyomi… It may just be a selfish hope, but I think Kiyomi-san would've been better with someone who is more clumsy, like her.
But now I don't like seeing Hashiguchi-san have such a sad reunion with his fiancé. It feels like my heart is going to explode, I can't stand to see the people who were so special to Kiyomi-san so sad.

"So then… Kiyomi?"
"There…" I look down, and point at the bedroom.
"…No way, Kiyomi!" While looking down, I pass by Hashiguchi-san and Yoshimi-san, who is following behind, and hurry to the entranceway.
"What is this! Kiyomi! Kiyomi!"
"Big sister!" From behind me, the sad screams of two people echo, until finally I can't hold back my sobs.

"Uugh…" I try to swallow by sobs, but become nauseated. I curl up in a ball, while holding my mouth. I want to cry and throw up.
Sakurako-san finds these two people so boring that she can't help but sigh. Sometimes I think her heart is made of cold, hard bones.

"Sakurako-san…"

When I open my mouth to say something, she puts her palm up to silence me.

"Phone."

She holds out a hand, to ask me for my smartphone.

"Huh?"
"We should report this. It's not helping to sit here like this."
"…I agree."

That may be so. They are grieving, and my mother is only standing at the entrance. I manage to

move – but when I try to call the police, Sakurako-san's white fingers take my smartphone away.

"Umm… Sakurako-san?"

She pushes the screen, and after a while she says "It's me" to the person on the other side of the call.

"I found the corpse of a tenant in the room of an apartment the boy's mother manages. The time of the incident is unknown, but it was probably within one day. It is troublesome to arrange for you. The address is-"

Sakurako-san tells the address of the apartment without hesitating, while quickly confirming by checking the mail on the table. From that tone, I think the person on the phone is Ariwara-san. Ariwara-san is Sakurako-san's fiancé, a young man who works for the police. He is a wonderful person with a clear head, and is accomplished in both academic and practical skills, but is somehow no match for Sakurako-san. Although he is a little older than Sakurako-san, they seem to have been childhood friends.

"I contacted them. The police will come soon."

After saying that, she hands me my smartphone back, and scatters mail and a bag's contents on the table.

"Sakurako-san! Don't touch that!"
"Why?"
"This might turn into a case."

Ignoring me, she confirms the contents of Kiyomi-san's bag.

"It's a case? Then why was the chain on the door?"
"Yes, but…"

Sakurako-san carefully arranges the contents of the bag on the table. Cell phone, key holder, pouch, pouch, different sized pouch… pocket tissue, towel, handkerchief, and a ballpoint pen.

"Hmm.."

Apparently the wallet stayed in the bag. She casually opens it, confirms that there is money in it, closes it, and adds it back to the row.

"It wasn't a thief, was it?"
"That's right, but I checked, and all the windows in every room are tightly locked."

With all cards laid out, it seems money wasn't the objective, but knowing that gives me a cold pit in my stomach. A grudge… or maybe just for the sake of assaulting someone? The rough state of the room clearly shows traces of her resistance. And her bare chest-

"Ugh…"

Imagining how much she suffered when she was killed, imagining her eyes when the suffering was too much to endure, it makes me vomit into a nearby trash can. I can feel the undigested rice balls passing through my throat. Sakurako-san doesn't say anything as she finds a partially finished tea in my bag, and hands it to me. Although my throat still hurts a bit after drinking and gargling two mouthfuls of tea, my nausea eases a bit. I place my plastic bottle on my knee, and wrap my arms around my leg. I hold my sleeves so tightly, I worry they might rip.

"Who would do this…"
"Who, indeed?"

As I mutter, Sakurako-san winks at me. Her attitude seems strange to me.

"What is it?"
"I said that all the windows in the room are locked now. In short, it's a locked room."
"…Huh?"

My heart beats painfully.

"The windows in the bedroom, washroom, and living room are all locked, and the doors to the rooms are locked tightly from the inside. Isn't this what makes it a locked room murder?"
"Locked room…?"

Sakurako-san carefully refills Kiyomi's bag, and finally drops the key holder inside. Yes, this is a locked room. The door is locked from the inside, and the window in the living room is the same way. Since Sakurako-san says everything is locked, it must be so.

"No way…"

I'm familiar with this situation, it's just like a mystery novel. I can hear the sound of a siren starting from far away.

"Just as quick as I expected."
"Well, Ariwara-san, is a public safety officer, isn't he?"
"Naoe's father was was originally in public safety. It would seem he inherited his ability from his father. To him, in terms of career advancements, it seems much lower than the police department or security department. Well, I guess it seems like a job for idiots."

Sakurako-san stand up, hands me a handkerchief, and heads for the entrance. I notice that I was not only in tears, but I also have a runny nose. I take it in a panic and press it to my face, and smell the calming scent of Sakurako-san's house and sweet fabric softener.

"Let's go. I dislike troublesome police officers."
"Right… I don't think we should be bothering Ariwara-san…"

I use the handkerchief while Sakurako-san puts on her shoes, then rush to the door. Before leaving, I look back at Kiyomi-san in the bedroom, the rough living room, and the open door. I wonder why I feel relieved.

"Just a minute-" My mother cries, but I tell her "I'll do my best", and go down the stairs to chase Sakurako-san. After all, we did everything we could, but this incident will still trouble my mother.

"…Either way, you shouldn't use your fiancé so conveniently like that."
"He's not really my fiancé, my parents picked him. He doesn't mean anything to me, so there's nothing wrong with me using him when it's convenient for me."
"What are you talking about? The Foreign Affairs Division 3 is a division that fights international terrorists."
"I don't know much about what he does."
"I've looked him up on Wikipedia."
"Well, he's just like his father, hunting far left communists."

While talking, we go down the stairs, and out to the street in front of the apartment. I try to forget what I saw earlier, after getting away from the topic of Kiyomi-san, but it's impossible. I take a deep breath, as tears start welling up again.

"So then… where are we going?"
"Well, if we stay here, won't it be troublesome if we get arrested."
"Yes, but… well, should we go to my house for some tea?"
"No, that's fine. It's cold, so let's go to the café there."

She says while pointing at the café across from the apartment. If we go there, we can watch the scene. Somehow, she seems concerned about the incident. As we approach the coffee shop, the red, flashing lights of a police car rush to us.

Part 3

At the cafe near the apartment, the interior is very home-like, since it was remodelled after the owner got to retirement age. The inside of the café is like a living room, so it feels more like going to a friend's house than a store.

“Well… Maybe this will help you calm down.

The ringing sound from the doorbell surprises me as I go in by myself. I wonder if the shopkeeper’s wife has a hobby of doing patchwork. There’s colourful cloths decorating all the walls and tables. All the wooden furniture is handmade, and the decorative plants are colourful. I suddenly remember how Kiyomi-san liked plants, and I feel like I was going to cry.

“It’s cold, please have a seat.” Says the elderly, grey-haired store owner, while he gestures to the shop and smiles. We head to a window seat. The menu on the side of the table is handwritten, making it slightly difficult to read. We can see the patrol car in front of the apartment through the window.

“…”

Although we’re ordinary people, we can ask Ariwara-san to give us some information about the investigation. Still, I want to see as much of the investigation as I can with my own eyes. Even though it would’ve been a hassle to talk to the police, I regret not staying to watch the investigation… Will the police tell me everything I want to know?

“Two hot chocolates”
“Huh?”

While I was too busy thinking, Sakurako-san suddenly speaks, so I look up.

“Hot chocolate? I’ll bring it to you soon.”

I’m not able to speak up in time. The shopkeeper finishes taking our order and repeats “two hot chocolates”. I smile at him.

“Yes… hot chocolate?”
“What?”

Why did Sakurako-san decide for me? But hot chocolate… I swallow my dissatisfaction.

“… It’s nothing… I just usually get coffee.”

I have a sulky look on my face while I answer, so Sakurako-san puffs out her cheeks angrily.

“I’m not really a coffee person. Doesn’t it smell unpleasant? That scent contains methyl mercaptan. Don’t you hate the smell of dead bodies?”
“That doesn’t mean you had to get us the same thing, though.”

The same smell as a corpse… That’s certainly shocking. But that’s just one part of it, I’m sure a

lot of drinks have the same thing. That's still no reason to get me hot chocolate. She points out a picture in the menu to me.

"Look, there's marshmallows on the picture."
"Huh?"
"How many times have I asked gran to put marshmallows in my hot chocolate?"

I guess it's all about the marshmallows? Surely such a high class lady could just buy marshmallows. Most supermarkets sell marshmallows for 100 yen, and even if there is some high class marshmallow, it can't be more than 1000 yen, right? Sakurako-san seems to understand the question before I even ask it.

"When I was a child, my American host family had hot chocolate with marshmallows in it. The way it was so sweet, and melted on my tongue was delicious, but gran says too much isn't good for you. No matter how much I ask, she'll only make plain cocoa."
"I understand… But why do I have to have one?"
"It'll be delicious, so you have to drink it."
"…"

There's no point in arguing anymore… I just give up and sigh. It was a nice story, and since Sakurako-san is trying to be nice by giving me something delicious, I guess I'll drink it. It can't be helped. I'm going to try to be the adult here, so I calm myself down. At any rate, there's no reason to refuse Sakurako-san's treat. Taking a deep breath as I rethink this, I look outside. Under the stairs of the apartment, my mother seems to be surrounded by police officers, and talking about some difficult topics.

"Six people. Considering the situation, they sent a lot of people." Sakurako-san says, surprised.

The police leave two people with my mother, while the remaining four go upstairs.

"Is something happening?" The shop keeper asks us with his brow wrinkled, as he brings us water.
"What's going on… a thief… well, it's a dangerous world." I murmur, while looking at the patchwork fabric coasters.
"That's right. Recently in this neighbourhood, there have been many incidents with deviants. A man showing up wearing nothing but a coat. Even at the primary school my grandchild goes to, it has been such a problem that my daughter hasn't been letting him play on the road."
"Huh…"
"With all the trouble in the neighbourhood, it'll be harder to go shopping for dinner, especially since it's so cold out. When my grandchild had a fever, my wife had to go help out my daughter so she could go get dinner. I'm telling you, it was quite a 'kawai' story."

I couldn't tell if the shopkeeper meant "scary" or the Hokkaido dialect for "tiring" when he said

“kawai”, but I decided not to think too much about it. I wanted a talking partner, but the shopkeeper is enthusiastically doing all the talking. Besides that, I am quite disturbed at the mention of that “deviant”. I wonder if that deviant is the one who attacked Kiyomi-san. I didn’t know that such a dangerous person was appearing in this neighbourhood at all. I wonder what the police are doing. I wonder why they haven’t stopped the deviant.

Sakurako-san sits quietly, with her lips to the glass, while listening to the shop keeper’s story, until the shopkeeper says “The hot water will be done soon.” I feel bad about it, but I’m a bit relieved I don’t need to listen to his stories anymore, since they’re a bit overwhelming.
The flashing lights on the police car are starting to irritate me. I close my eyes, and Kiyomi-san’s sad figure flashes through my mind. I feel nauseated as I think about her anguished face, almost like she’s asking “why didn’t you help me?”. I know I shouldn’t blame myself for it, but I can’t help it.

“Thank you for waiting.”

The shopkeeper brings us two hot chocolates. The hot chocolates are filled to the brim in bisque mugs, and have marshmallows placed on top.

“Come and make your choice. Cinnamon is a classic, but it’s good with Japanese pepper cloves, or chilli peppers.”

There’s a small bowl of whipped cream, and a rattan basket filled with spices, the shopkeeper immediately stands up. But the expression he shows for a moment when he looks at us shows he seems suspicious of us. Surely Sakurako-san and I together seem like a unique pair. Our ages are too close to be parent and child, but too far apart to be lovers. Besides, Sakurako-san is much more beautiful than I am.

“Mm, it smells good.”

As we sit together, Sakurako-san takes a drink of her hot chocolate, and adds 3 spoonfuls of whipped cream, dropping a bit in the process.

“Are you sure it’s safe to have that much?”

How much sweetness is too much for her? My hot chocolate is very warm and rich, but it isn’t too sweet, and the sweetness of the marshmallows isn’t too bothersome, either. Perhaps you can gauge someone’s maturity by what topping they use. Even though I’m supposed to the the adult here, I still have a child’s tongue, so I add 2 spoonfuls of cream. Even though I don’t think it’s quite sweet enough, I decide to drink it like this because of the comfortable smoothness of the milk fat.

I don’t try any spices. I don’t have a very adventurous personality, and I’m not in the mood to try anything new with my drink. It doesn’t seem like Sakurako-san used any spices, either.
We silently drink our hot chocolate for a while. I’m fine with drinking, but I don’t really want to talk, so I just stare at my cup. I look at my watch to check the time, and see it’s already past 3 o’clock.

“Today…”
“Yeah?”
“Thank you for coming with me today.”

It would’ve been okay for us to have been silent, but I feel like the shopkeeper is watching us, so I decide to talk to Sakurako-san cheerfully.

“You have nothing to thank me for.”

Sakurako-san looks at me like she doesn’t want to talk, but I keep talking anyway.

“Well, if you hadn’t been there, I would’ve been more disturbed.”

It’s the truth. Surely if I had been alone, I wouldn’t be able to calmly talk like this. Being with her is both good and bad.

“… Or should I have a grudge?”

I bow to the table.

“What?”
“With you there, I was able to see the dead body.”

Even though I’m thankful, why do I feel so much hatred?

“Hahahaha!”
“… What’s so funny?”

I raise my head at the sudden laughter.

"Yeah, I just remembered that there was a woman who said the same thing as you."
“The same thing?”
“My biological mother.”

Sakurako-san says with a mouthful of chocolate.

“… Sorry, I don’t have any ill will.”

I take note of what I shouldn't say anymore.

"No, it's fine. It's the truth."
"But…"
"It's fine. I'm aware that there's always corpses at my feet."
"Sakurako-san…"

I don't really know the details. However I'm certain that it's taboo to mention Sakurako-san's "biological mother". I regret saying such trivial things. I finish my hot chocolate in silence before Sakurako-san finishes hers. When I look at Sakurako-san, she's laughing and smiling. Even though she is a detestable person, the number one reason you can't hate her is because of her smile. Despite her social standing, Sakurako-san is not a good person, but her smile is cute.

"… Please stop carrying around those disposable, plastic gloves with you everywhere."

I say, while I watch Sakurako-san happily adding more whipped cream to her hot chocolate.

"Aren't they convenient, though? They're made of nitrile, so they're a bit more expensive than latex gloves, but they're more resistant to chemicals and oil, so they're good for things other than touching dead bodies."

She sticks her lip out and pouts, while I glare at her.

"Besides, it's not like I'm carrying them in case I see a human corpse, that's unlikely. Bones, on the other hand, are all around us all the time, and even inside of us. I like bones. I don't, however, like snatching away the life of living things. So, I just take the bones of animals that were outside."
"When you do things like that, doesn't gran get angry at you?"
"That's right. One time when I was 10, I first picked up a weasel that was dying on the road."
"10 years old…"

Even from such a young age, gran has had to deal with such troubles… I think of an agile and young gran.

"Thanks to the lady, gran is quite tired." She smiles a lot, but it's tough for her.

For me, Sakurako-san is a genius who I respect, even if she is a bit weird. It's like time flows differently for Sakurako-san, and she sees things other people don't. She is a genius, but she's also an eccentric. I think that boundary between them is ambiguous. For an ordinary person like me, always being forced into exhausting situations, feeling hatred and surprise – sometimes I can't help but get sick of it.

It’s like a drug.

I hear the ambulance sirens approaching, until it stops in front of the apartment. I listen to Sakurako-san’s story I wait for the body to be carried out. In cases like this, the body can’t be moved until the doctor diagnoses death. I see a few lifesavers take out a stretcher from the ambulance. After interacting with the police, they go up to the second floor. I thought it would take a bit longer, but they quickly take Kiyomi-san’s body from the room, wrapped in a vinyl sheet. Yoshimi-san is crying while clinging to Kiyomi’s body. Behind her, Hashiguchi-san is talking with the police.

The ambulance does not ring the sirens, as there is no reason for Kiyomi-san to hurry anymore. The ambulance leaves, and Yoshimi-san is comforted by my mother, but Hashiguchi-san doesn’t move. Although it was already gone, he just stares at the direction the ambulance went for a while. I can’t imagine the sorrow of losing your beloved fiancée. It’s painful to see him with such deep sadness, so I look back into the store. The shopkeeper is looking at us, and we make eye contact, so I quickly hide my face in the newspaper.

“She was pretty.”
“Huh?”
“The woman who was renting that room.”
Sakurako-san, who is trying to enjoy her hot chocolate, looks at me with a face as if to ask “what is he talking about?”
“In summer, I often mow lawns as a part time job. My mother manages the apartment, so I weed the garden for pocket money.”
“That’s some pretty demanding work.”
“Well, my hourly pay was pretty cheap. It was fine to earn a little pocket money, though. Since the neighbouring lot is empty, the seeds float into the apartment’s garden, so the weeds grow quickly. Dandelions often come up through cracks in the asphalt in the parking lot, and near the entrance, so I come here a lot when it gets warmer.”

I point to the empty lot that is now covered in snow. The lot is now a building site, with a dirty hydraulic excavator, and a prefab cabin covered in snow.

“Sometimes I’d meet with Kiyomi-san… When I was weeding, she’d bring me a cold drink so I didn’t get heatstroke, and she’d help me.”

I remember how dazzling Kiyomi-san looked, wearing a hat and saying “It’s really hot today.”

“Her younger sister, Yoshimi-san, is a very different kind of person, she’s neat and clean… to say it badly, she’s a bit plain.”

Her tight bun and light makeup. Her simple suit. Her thin fingernails that were painted the same colour as her skin.

“My fingers aren’t very long, so if I paint the nails this skin colour, they look a little longer, don’t they?”

I reminisce on her shy laugh, and look to Sakurako-san’s hands. Sakurako-san’s hands are big, with long fingers. Her long nails are beautifully polished, but they are they’re the colour of cherry blossoms, not painted with anything.

“She wasn’t the kind of person to dress for other people, but I think her quiet nature was quite beautiful…”
“I see, it’s something like that?”
“Something like that?”
“In other words, that woman played a part in your delusion of love.”
“Wh…! Sakurako-san!”
“It’s normal. I’ve seen figures that 97% of high school students have fantasies like that. Though I don’t know if the number is true or not, I don’t like it’s too extreme.”

Even though I get used to it, Sakurako-san’s words still make me blush violently. Most importantly, the way she says it so bluntly. She always says things like this so nonchalantly. She seems to think that even body parts are easy to talk about, just a simple organ. She feels nothing about things normal people feel shy about. But I’m done with listening to it. And more than that, I don’t want Kiyomi-san to be spoken about like that.

“Please stop!”

And as always, Sakurako-san won’t listen to me when I try to control her.

“I read a thesis saying that doing things like that occasionally can prevent prostate cancer. The rate of cancer can be cut by a third. There is also a theory that it’s bad for your body, though, particularly due to addiction. You can do whatever you want.”
“Really…”

I’m getting a headache.

“So… That’s not what I meant. Well there certainly was something like favour with her, but it's not like that. It was more of a longing… and also… please have a little more respect for the dead! And me!”
“People are people, whether they’re alive or dead. Do you pay respect to people you don’t know?” Sakurako-san says clearly.

For a moment, I can’t believe she declared something like that. Shouldn’t human beings always respect each other?

“Anyway! I was fond of her! I love her like I love all human beings, not like that. Please don’t say it so strangely again!”

I unintentionally stand up and raise my voice, causing Sakurako-san to quickly turn meek. I put my fingers on my cheeks in dismay.

“Calm down… I didn’t realize it would disturb you so much.”

I notice that I have tears on my cheeks. I wonder if Sakurako-san can’t understand the extremely simple sentiment that it’s sad when an acquaintance passes away. Sakurako-san notices for the first time how much she hurt me. She looks sorry, and apologizes in a small voice.

“…This kind of thing is really shocking… I can’t believe Kiyomi-san is dead…”

As I collapse back into my chair, the spices on the table make a small clank sound, like they’re all sighing at once.

“But it’s the truth. She’s just a dead body in a room.”
“Really… isn’t it a locked room?”
“Is that so? Were all the keys closed inside?”
“The room was… a mess.”
“A girl should be good at cleaning.”
“It’s not right. Her room was always comfortable and perfectly clean when I visited and drank herbal tea with her.”

I remember the room having natural tones, white, green, and brown, just like the café here. Kiyomi-san liked to have the window open rather than use the air conditioning while we were weeding, so it smelled just a little bit like soil inside. While arranging the retro pop orange, yellow, and green floral pattern curtains and lace, she’d ask “are you thirsty?” with a tender smile. She’s bring out a glass teapot from the fridge that she prepared in advance. The cold mint tea was poured into a glass with a vitamin coloured dot pattern.

“It should be refreshing. It’s homemade.” Kiyomi-san would say as she poured plenty into my glass.

She harvested a lot of mint this year. Although it was her first time, she said it turned out better than she thought. To me, the felt good when I was all hot from working, it wasn’t what I’d call delicious, but I was more occupied with quenching my thirst. But still, Kiyomi-san’s gentle laugh, and radiant beauty, I was glad that she would treat me to tea like that. Sure I said things like “it’s really delicious”, and “it’s good for the body”. Kiyomi-san’s delighted smile was enough of a reward for me, we’d chat away the midsummer afternoons. A calm, modest, summer scene.

I wasn't very close with Kiyomi-san, since our lives didn't overlap very much. If she got married and left that room, we wouldn't be able to meet anymore. But I thought that was fine. It's no lie that I was a little jealous when I heard she got married. But I thought that I wanted her to be happier beyond that.

No, I thought that this person would be happy. A person laughing gently, a nice person who paints her nails the colour of skin and serves homemade mint tea for guests, who cherishes her husband. She would surely be a good wife, a good mother, and when the time come, I would say "congratulations". That's why her life can't end like this.

"Kiyomi-san is the kind of person who could live a nice life like this."

An event like that should never have happened to her. I can say that with absolute certainty.

"That messy room… Are there traces of fighting? What about the deviant the shopkeeper was talking about?"
"Well? Then you'd say this event really is a locked room murder?"

Sakurako-san raises one eyebrow and has a surprised voice. Speaking of which I can't understand that she is so surprised.

"… Isn't that what you think, Sakurako-san?

Well then, what do you say? I wonder if she would have rather died from illness? Sakurako-san breathlessly laughs at me, so I give her a puzzled look.

"Let me say two things. Those "tricks" are just in stories – you really are stupid.
"Wh…"

Well, I'm not very clever. When you're with Sakurako-san, you become particularly aware of that. However, in this situation I couldn't understand how she died.

"Well then, what do you think, Sakurako-san!?"
"Usually, when you kill someone, what do most people think first?"
"Is it… the method?

Sakurako-san clicks her tongue three times – it means no.

"No, it's to be sure you kill the other person."

She says as she sits back in her chair, the same way she sits in her comfortable chair at her estate.

“People who want to kill someone will murder, no matter what. The first thing they think is to erase someone from the world – what happens after is secondary.”

Sakurako-san picks up a spoon from under the table, soundlessly.

“Do you understand? You could kill someone with a spoon, if you really wanted to. In other words, killing someone is not about a method, it’s about ‘feelings’ and ‘impulses’. Most people who commit murder want to kill their victim. That is a very urgent situation. The reason behind most murder is something stupid. There are many who follow this method, however there are many exceptions as well.”

She says while raising the spoon. The round, silver spoon reflects the bright police car lights from outside. I swallow my saliva.

“In other words, people are driven to commit murder by the ‘disease’ of wanting to kill, driven by emotions. Of course, there are some people who prepare carefully. But “I want to kill” is a method that is more simple, reliable, and merely requires brute force, without relying on uncertain tricks. Do you understand? Killing is pointless unless you actually kill them. That is to say, a murder in real life would never turn out like a mystery. People don’t kill while depending on probability or gambles.”
“…Well, Sakurako-san, what do you think happened at that place?”
“Do you want me to play detective?”
“I’d say I’m stupid, so I just want you to prove you’re clever.”
“I see, that’s right.”

Sakurako-san says as she stands up.

“Let’s go.”
“Huh?”

While following it, she seems puzzled, then points outside. I look to see the police getting into the police car and leaving. Upon seeing it, I quickly put on my coat, while Sakurako-san calmly heads for the register.

“That’ll be 1160 yen.”

Sakurako-san smiles at the shopkeeper and says “it was very delicious hot chocolate” while paying, and the shopkeeper puts away his newspaper in a hurry. Sakurako-san’s beauty makes the shopkeeper blush happily while she speaks.

"I am mixing French and Belgian couper tuile chocolate at home. To give it that flavour, it needs quite a bit of cocoa. Afterwards, the aroma of the chocolate warmed by immersion in hot water rather than a direct flame…”

The shopkeeper either really wanted to talk to her, or was happy she praised his hot chocolate, but Sakurako-san wasn't into the conversation.

"Sorry, it really was delicious." I quickly apologize to the disappointed looking shopkeeper, then chase after Sakurako-san who was walking out of the store.
"Please come again!"

But the door closes before the shopkeeper finishes, so I bow to the glass. Maybe there'll be another chance. No matter how delicious it was, it might be awkward coming back here again.

Part four

When I walk onto the street, I see Hashiguchi-san and Yoshimi-san start walking. I can't hear the contents of their conversation, but Yoshimi-san seems disturbed while phoning someone. Hashiguchi-san is looking down, while walking a few steps away.

"Let's go."

Sakurako-san says, while walking in parallel with the two people across the road. Yoshimi-san doesn't seem to notice us. Yoshimi-san soon finishes her phone call, and walks up to Hashiguchi-san, but he does not lift his head.

"--!"

Yoshimi-san turns around in front of Hashiguchi-san, and shouts something. I can't hear it over the car that passes by. It must be something serious, because she has such a tense expression. But Hashiguchi-san is still depressed, and keeps his head down. Since Yoshimi-san just lost her big sister, I feel that Hashiguchi-san should try to be a little more kind to her. But I immediately remember him staring at the ambulance, in the snow, and feel ashamed of how I thought poorly of him. Hashiguchi-san is a person who just lost his important fiancée. Even if she was supposed to be his sister-in-law, I guess it can't be helped that she's not being very considerate. Not only did Kiyomi-san pass away, but they also lost their "life", it made it hard for me to see them.

"Sakurako-san—"

How long do we have to go on like this? When I was about to ask Sakurako-san a question, she raises her hand to stop a taxi.

"Sakurako-san?
"I have some business to take care of. Let's move on to the next place."
"Huh? Business… oh!"

With that said, she slides into the taxi she stopped. I'm confused, but get into the taxi, Sakurako-san is showing something to the driver and saying "please take us here". The car starts running, and Sakurako-san lets out a slow sigh.

"So, what's the business?"
"Don't worry about it. Let's sort out the situation, first."
"Eh?"
"Name one thing you know about her, it can be anything."
"Ah…"
"Do you want me to interrogate you like a detective?"
"Ah… but I don't know what to say so suddenly…"

In the first place, I'm not exactly very familiar with Kiyomi-san.

"Age, occupation."
"That's not something people talk about openly…"
"Anything is fine. Has she ever let something accidentally leak out during a conversation?"

I think back on my conversations with Kiyomi-san. Greeting her in front of the apartment. Weeding together, short tea breaks. On a summer night of the Kagura River fireworks display, I happened to meet her by a food stall – she wasn't wearing a pretty colour like pink or light blue, but a black yukata, with a charming feel.

"… I don't know how old she was, but probably as old as you, maybe a little older. At the end of the year, we somehow got onto the topic of marriage, and she said she was marrying someone who is about 30 years old – perhaps she was 27~29 years old?"

I probably don't have to mention the yukata. I just tell Sakurako-san about her approximate age.

"So in a modern terms, an arasa." (TL NOTE: an arasa is a woman around 30 years old)
"She was definitely a pharmacist. I hear she worked at the pharmacist's office near the bus stop right there. It's convenient because she could just go home to eat lunch."

Sakurako-san nods as I point to the bus with an Asahiyama zoo design on it driving off.

"Pharmacist, huh? Anything else?"
"Anything else… Well, it's not like we were really close."
"Anything is fine, even if it's something small. Tell me anything you remember."
"Small… Oh, right. I heard that she wanted to be a florist."
"Florist?"
"Yeah. Her hands ended up chapped from kitchen work so she just did her best at raising plants in planters in her room."

“Planters? Now that you mention it, there were a lot of planters in her room.”
“Apparently she sometimes gave my mother plants. My mother says that her plants grow quite well, and she really likes flowers.

Apparently she raised the mint for the no-so-delicious mint tea she made me drink. I wonder who will take care of her flowers now that she has disappeared. It would be nice if there was someone who would take care of the plants. If no one will, I want to take them to my house. I haven’t raised flowers before, but I can easily look it up on the internet, and I can be taught by my mother and gran. I’d like to take care of the lives that have been left behind. But to be honest, I really want to drink that no-so-delicious mint tea. Kiyomi-san’s mint tea.

“…”

I pretend to look at the scenery outside, but I secretly wipe my tears away. It is completely gloomy outside. I look at my cell phone, it’s about 4PM. There are many emails from my mother, but I decide not to look at them right now.

“Her fiancé is an ophthalmologist.”
“Seems that way…”
“Her younger sister works at the same hospital.”
“Is that so….? Ah, right, she told me she works at that hospital.”
“And the both of them are having an affair. Well, they weren’t married yet, so I guess he was two timing.”
“What-?”

My tears don’t dry easily. I turn away, and my racing thoughts suddenly stop.

“Huh?! Wh-what was that?!”
“Weren’t they embracing each other in the room?”
“Wasn’t it more clinging to each other from the shock, rather than embracing each other? You’re skipping too many steps!”

That’s such a discourteous thing to say, so I reprimand Sakurako-san with an irritated voice. But she laughs at me, scornfully.

“You wouldn’t normally hug your boss, especially a man who is your older sister’s fiancé. This is Japan, we don’t have a custom of hugging like western countries do. Moreover, he didn’t hesitate to put his hand on her back.”
“Huh…”
“You and I are close to each other, but if I embrace you, wouldn’t you hesitate to embrace me back?”

She says, but I’m at a loss for words. Even if she is an acquaintance, why doesn’t he feel

hesitant to some extent to sudden physical contact with someone of the opposite gender? I actually would be surprised if Sakurako-san hugged me. Actually, just her touching my cheek would be surprising.

"But some people probably feel different about it, right? It's just that part about them having an affair…"
"Really? Those two might have a physical relationship."
"They might just be close…. And adult men shouldn't be doing that kind of thing."
"A man and a woman. No matter how close they are, they would still be cautious. The probability of the sisters' DNA being the same is one in four. 50% from the mother, 50% from the father, therefore the probability of both the father and mother-derived DNA being matched between the sisters is 25%. Even just looking at them, the sisters seem quite different, even if the DNA is the same. They don't exactly have the same body make up. Therefore the sisters abide by Kant's condition."
"Sakurako-san…"
"Particularly the younger sister, who has a body that men find attractive. Besides being medical staff, that woman is wearing perfume. It might be somewhat permissible for an ophthalmologist, but she should still restrain herself, even if it isn't prohibited."
"Is there something wrong with putting on perfume?"

For a young woman, putting on perfume should be normal.

"Well, have you ever met a nurse that wears perfume?"
"Ah…"

I don't have an answer. The only smell I can think of for a hospital is the smell of alcohol, or the smell of disinfectant. There are also other people working there. I remember Yoshimi-san's sweet smell, and her sigh instead of replying.

"It seems the topic of emails with the fiancé came up. I wonder if she revealed the contents of the messages to her sister. She was looking those emails next to that man. When work is over, they smile and joke together. "
"No way…"

The lonely figures of Yoshimi-san and Hashiguchi-san, who has been saddened from the bottom of their hearts from the older sister's death, pass my mind.

"There's nothing like that…"

I don't want to think the two were in such a relationship, but at the same time, Sakurako-san's vivid words make me think otherwise.

"And what's strange is the time of death."

“Time of death?”
“Don’t you think it’s strange that she died within 24 hours?”
“What’s strange?”
“The little sister said she was fine the day before yesterday.”
“Is it strange for someone to be lively the day before, but dead within 24 hours?”

For example, it’s strange if you met an hour ago. But if they met the day before yesterday, and Kiyomi-san was alive at the time, nothing is wrong.

“If you walk in on a dead body, it would surprise you.”
“Well, if you can’t contact your sister for two days, would you let the manager cut the chain?”
“Huh…?”
“If it has been a week or a month, you’ll start to worry, but it has only been two days.”
“Ah… that’s right.”

Only two days. When I think about it, I last emailed by older brother two weeks ago. Even if our relationship isn’t bad, waiting two days seems like a generally acceptable amount of time. It’s only 48 hours. I wonder how close the sisters would have to be for such a short amount of time to not be an exaggeration.

“When you say that, it seems…. strange…. but…”
“But?”
“It’s just a bit, but Yoshimi-san… It feels like she knew she was dead.” I mutter, while Sakurako-san slowly nods.
“Perhaps the little sister was in such a situation that she felt uneasy about the big sister’s lack of contact for the last two days, or something. For example, she might have been able to predict her sister was dead in the room.”
“Is there any mistake in the time of death?”
“Although it’s not 100%, the corpse hasn’t decomposed much yet, considering the temperature and her body shape. I’m not an expert, but it seems to be between 12-24 hours, from the cloudiness of the corneas and rigor mortis. But she was alive just the other day. As long as corpses don’t move around, and the little sister isn’t lying, it can’t be more than two days.”

Sakurako-san loves bones. As a result, she often comes into contact with the stages before skeletonization, when it is not a matter of preparing human bone specimens. It’s true that Sakurako-san cherished her uncle, sometimes passed through his laboratory and has a deeper knowledge on the subject than ordinary people like myself, but she is not a professional. But whatever it was, I can at least understand that Kiyomi-san’s corpse is new.

“Well, maybe the older sister found out about the guy’s relationship. Maybe she got an email hinting towards suicide from the older sister.”
“Why suicide?! Then, on the other hand, doesn’t that make the younger sister suspicious? Or the fiancé?”

“If I betrayed you like that, would you kill yourself?”

Sakurako-san suspiciously raises one eyebrow.

“If the circumstances were favourable, I don’t think it’d be impossible. Besides, you say that destroyed room!”
"Indeed, there are a lot of events that are hard to understand in the world"

Besides that, I don’t want to doubt Yoshimi-san or Hashiguchi-san, and the messy room has signs of struggling.

“Well then, would you tell me your reasoning?”
“Huh?”
“In the scenario that you think the little sister or fiancé killed her.”
“Scenario…” I stammer.

But just as my body has bones, everything has a true nature. Surely there is something hidden in Kiyomi-san’s death. That’s why I decide to organize my feelings by myself first.

“…It’s the room that I’m interested in. Kiyomi-san’s room is not normally messy, so the filthiness and trash gave me a bad feeling. There are traces of fighting with someone. It couldn’t have been a thief, since it’d be strange that no money was taken out of her wallet, so we can scrap that line of thought.”

Sakurako-san raises her voice. I feel anxious about saying this, since it could come off that I’m stupid, or admiring.

“I think she was conscious during the fight, so I don’t think sleeping pills were used. Since there wasn’t any blood, the method couldn’t have been a strike, so maybe she was strangled?”

That's right, her clothes lying on the bed were beautiful. Although her chest was disordered, there was no visible blood, and I couldn’t smell any blood. I try to think of anything I can, and search my mind – oh yeah, unlike the rest of the room, the entranceway wasn’t messy at all. So, when I opened the inside door, I was very surprised.

“The entranceway was pretty. There weren’t even any shoes scattered, it didn’t look like anyone just barged in. That said, it was probably someone who wouldn’t resist an invitation to Kiyomi-san’s home – someone like Hashiguchi-san, Yoshimi-san, or a third party that we have no idea about. It might be okay to forget about the deviant line of thought. And then… I think of myself as being a very intelligent person. I am very familiar with mysteries.”
“Why is that?”
“I don’t think there were any locked room tricks.”

I declare, when Sakurako-san suddenly starts laughing.

“W…. why are you laughing!?”

I ask, but Sakurako-san truly finds it funny, and continues to laugh. The driver gives us a puzzled expression. I become very uncomfortable.

“Please stop laughing at me. What did I say that’s so funny?”
“You don’t find it funny?” With a bit of laughter still in her voice, Sakurako-san finally answers me.
“Well… please explain…”

Sakurako-san furthers my discouragement by gently patting the back of my head while I re-seat myself.

“Think carefully. Why would the criminal choose a locked room?”
“What?”
“The reason for the locked room.”
“That is… to not get arrested?”
“Are you an idiot? Is it to make it seem like an accident or a suicide? It’s to eliminate the fact that a third party intervened because it’s a closed room. What on earth is the meaning of creating a locked room in a situation that clearly looks like a murder at first sight?”
“Well, that’s to disturb the investigation…”
“As I have said many times, you really are a fool. It wouldn’t make sense to be a locked room once it’s understood that it’s the third party’s crime. Whether the door is open or closed, the police will still investigate a murder. Well, I guess there are some cases where people are too negligent to clean up when making it seem like a suicide.”

Sakurako-san lets out an exaggerated sigh. Why bother saying that much? Her sigh sticks in my mind, making me feel disappointed.

“How was the locked room made? Disregarding the key, what about the chain? What about the rings and money being left in the room?
“I’m not sure, but there are a few methods…”

As I answer, I realize my “reasoning” is too unreasonable.

“Well, that’s fine. The method can be left unknown. Then for what reason would it hinder the arrest of the criminal? If the method of escape is unknown, can the not criminal be arrested? That’s not the case. The status of the body, items left behind, listening to stories of a suspicious person nearby… there’s such varied evidence tied into this case. The police don’t often omit brute force methods. Even with complete evidence, even with a locked room, an arrest can be made without touching anyone a thing.”

“But her face was in anguish!”

That’s enough. As you say, Sakurako-san, I’m stupid. Even so, you can’t convince me that she wasn’t in pain. It was really painful. Her face when she was alive was so pretty, but now it’s just full of anguish.

“If it’s it homicide, is it painful to suffer on the verge of death?”
“That’s right… However I feel regret, and anger when I think about her face! So… There’s no way it was suicide. Kiyomi-san’s corpse didn’t feel like that, she wasn’t in despair!”

After all, that’s it. Kiyomi-san’s pained expression, and her lifeless form are making me feel that it wasn’t suicide. It was kind and seemed fragile, but I’m sure there was a thick bone of truth inside of her. She was part of my world. An inviolable strength. That’s why I don’t think she would betray her lover, I can’t bear to think about that. I absolutely can’t believe she would give up everything and commit suicide.

“For example, Kiyomi-san could’ve been almost killed by her fiancé, or Yoshimi-san, and still been conscious. In an effort to protect someone important, she mustered the last of her strength to put the chain on and lock the room. Surely that’s it, Kiyomi-san was such an honest person.”

Once again, I clearly state my case.

“Then she went back to the bedroom to suffer and die?”
“I think it’s probable. Kiyomi-san couldn’t have been thinking about suicide at the end.”
“…Despair isn’t the only reason for someone to choose death.”

Sakurako-san stares in silence for a while, so I quickly start speaking.

“Well then, you solve the mystery of her death!”
“That’s the police’s job. If proper investigators and doctors conduct a proper investigation, the truth will come to light. There is no reason for me to give an answer.”
“Please don’t mislead me into thinking you have the answer!”

I glare as Sakurako-san, who is cowering from my words. I take a short breath, and open my mouth to give up.

“First, you will be able to tell if there was a fight or not by the autopsy. Whether or not there was an attempt to create a defence, or traces of resistance. If someone was violent enough to mess up the room that much, wouldn’t someone get killed if they tried to fight back? The attacker’s hair stuck to her clothes, or a scratch from her opponent. There are many cases of the criminal’s DNA remaining.”
“Criminal’s DNA…”
“You can usually find hair from the attacker if you comb for it, as many will forget about it. If you

want to commit a crime, I recommend shaving."
"I wouldn't do something like that!"
"Well, I don't think you have the ferocity in you to do it."

She starts laughing, and it makes me uncomfortable. Even if I was being ridiculous, her insensitivity is offensive. Still, Sakurako-san has a habit of only talking to people about things they don't like. By doing that, she can explore how her companion reacts, look into their heart, and control their emotions.

"Please, let's get back on topic."

I try to speak calmly, so I don't get played into her hand. Sakurako-san looks displeased, and seems to be bored. After all, she stopped a good story just to make me angry.

"I see…"

Sakurako-san sighs, and raises one corner of her mouth into a bitter face.

"… I didn't see any bleeding, or trauma on her at first glance."
"Couldn't it have been a method that doesn't leave any wounds?"

Sakurako-san slowly shakes her head.

"If you're trying to kill someone who is resisting, you'd try to stab, strike, or strangle them, wouldn't you? However, there wasn't any trauma, and no marks to indicate strangulation. If there was suffocation, blood congestion, small point bleeding, etc. there would be evidence of it on her eyes, but there are no such symptoms."
"Well, what about death by disease…?"
"Well then."

Sakurako-san shrugs her shoulders in a "dismissal" pose.

"But why would the room be so messed up?"
"Maybe from hysteria – we can check."
"Are you sure?"

And again, wonder about where the taxi was headed.

"By the way, where on earth are we going?"

I ask, but Sakurako-san just shows me the ticket between her fingers instead of relying.

"Botanical garden?"

It is a ticket stub for the city's botanical garden.

Part 5

The botanical garden was developed naturally in Asahikawa, and grows plants native to Japan. It is a new facility that was made last year. The Asahiyama zoo boom boosted tourists, but Asahikawa remains as usual. Instead, there is a lot of development to break down the deplorable situation that a lot of parking lots at large supermarkets are full on weekends, but none of it has much effect. It seems like Asahikawa citizens don't like change. That's why this new, beautiful botanical garden isn't popular.

"Why a place like this?"
"I found this admission ticket from yesterday in her wallet."
"Huh?!"

Sakurako-san says, while I give her a surprised expression.

"You can't do that! If you do that, it'll hinder the investigation!"
"There was something I was curious about. With this, I'm fine."

As usual, she has a confusing lack of common sense. Although it is merely a single scrap of paper, there is the possibility that it's an important clue to the arrest of the criminal.

"You said you wanted to know the truth, didn't you?"
"That's right!"

That's why there's good things and bad things that you can do! While I think about how I'll manage to get Sakurako-san to apologize to the police, the taxi somehow arrives at the botanical garden.

"Anyway, we have to return it."

I put my hands in my jacket and take care not to touch it with my bare hands. I take the stub from Sakurako-san, carefully wrap it in a tissue so that I don't get my fingerprints on it, and put it in my wallet.

"You're really troubled by small things."

Sakurako-san pays the taxi driver while complaining about how troublesome I am. I think she's being too sketchy, but I don't say it. Working on bones is such precise work that takes hours, there's nothing like it. I let out a sigh.

“Hey! Sakurako-san!”

The moment I get out of the car, I become bothered about how we’ll use this ticket. Sakurako-san has already headed for the reception desk of the botanical garden.

“It looks like it’s closing soon.”

Looking at the signboard, it seems it closes in one hour. Although the lady at the reception desk says “We’ll be closing soon.” Sakurako-san responds with “I don’t care.” and buys a ticket.

“Where are you going?”

Sakurako-san looks at the pamphlet, hands me the tickets, and suddenly turn to face somewhere else. I chase after Sakurako-san through the greenhouse, passing various plants. I’m frustrated that I don’t even have an explanation of what she’s doing.

“Sakurako-san!”
“A flower vulnerable to sunlight.”
“Vulnerable to sunlight?”
“Ah, here.”

Finally, she stops and points to the plate by her feet. “Plants that grow in the shade, nationwide”? As I read it, Sakurako-san nods… and opens the door that leads inside. A stuffy, humid air envelops us. Inside, it’s dimly lit, and the plates explaining each plant are traced with fluorescent paint. Apparently Sakurako-san’s “target” is here, so I check each and every flower and plant, one by one.

“This is it.”

Sakurako-san suddenly stops.

“This?”

There is short grass growing in it. There are some fruits that look like oval, black berries with slightly jagged leaves. I don’t know what plant this is, but it somehow resembles a hydrangea.

“Nightshade…?”

On the explanation plate, it says “Scopolia japonica Maxim, family Solanaceae”. Beside the grass is a plate that says “It is dangerous, please do not touch”. Sakurako-san takes out rubber gloves from her pocket. Sakurako-san reaches out for the fruit without hesitating, after tightening the glove on her fingers.

“It says not to touch it.”
“That’s right, it’s poisonous.”
“Huh?”

She kneels down, and carefully looks at the stems with fruit on them.

“What are you doing?”
“Getting proof – ah, this is it.”
“Look at this” Sakurako-san says, while pointing at her hand.
“Were there traces of this fruit at the scene?”
“…That reminds me, was there?”

It’s hard to see because of the dim lighting, but when I look into her hands, there are traces of the fruit where the stems were.

“That…. What’s that?”

I ask. Sakurako-san puts and overripe, shrivelled fruit on my palm to show me.

“It looks like a blueberry, but it has a deadly poison in it. Children easily die from them, and an adult can die from just 10.”
“Ten of them…?!

Again, I get chills down my spine.

“No way… Kiyomi-san had this?”
“Probably.”

Sakurako-san nods.

“Deadly nightshade.”
“Deadly nightshade?! This is?!”

I now understand what plant this is. Nightshade is one of the poisons often used in mysteries, alongside wolfsbane.

“Oh yeah, because it is a Japanese type, it’s not the exact same plant, but the properties are about the same.”

My knees start to feel weak as I listen to her. I sit down, hug my legs, and bury my face in my knees.

“…Why? Why did Kiyomi-san die this way?”

“The symptoms of nightshade poisoning include delusions and hallucinations.”
“Delusions…”

Oh, I see-

“Then the messy room wasn’t from a fight, but…”
“It seems the partner she was fighting with was herself.”
“But only this…”

I start to speak, but Sakurako-san pokes my head. I lift my face, and Sakurako-san is crouching beside me, staring at me. Sakurako-san taps her temple above her left eye with her finger, and I blink at her.

“Huh?”
“Eyes.”
“Eyes?”
“Do you remember how her eyes looked a bit off?”
“I don’t…”

And, although I answered that way, it’s true that her eyes looked strange. They looked like there was a cloudy film over them, and they were wide open.

“Her pupils were dilated.”
“What does…?”
“It was hard to understand since the cloudiness of her corneas had already started, but they were definitely wide open. This is seen in typical nightshade poisoning symptoms."
“…”
“You said her fiancé is an ophthalmologist.”

I nod and look downward.

“Women used to use nightshade to make their eyes beautiful, so she must have heard about it from her fiancé, and she would also know about atropine is she was a pharmacist. Perhaps she liked mystery novels.”

After Sakurako-san’s explanation, a BGM waltz slowly flows from the speaker to indicate the garden is closing. The sad melody makes the feeling sink in.

“I don’t know if it was planned or a coincidence.”

Since she liked plants so much, she might have come here as a distraction from what happened, and saw this fruit. Or it may have had an implicit meaning. For her fiancé, it may have held a special message – In the language of flowers, it means “silence”.

“Silence…”

This is the first time the word has felt so sad.

“Well, she came here yesterday, quietly taking this fruit home, and ate it in her room. It’s not easy to take a lethal dose, even if it’s just one mouthful. But she’s a pharmacist. She probably put it in a capsule and took the amount necessary for her death. Symptoms appear in about 30 minutes to 1 hour.”
“Then…”
“She took a lethal dose. She was probably suffering with terrible delirium, and it must have been painful. Her shirt being torn from her chest, and that expression of agony seem convincing of that…. Well, there wasn’t much vomit at that place, so I guess she prepared the day before. She was incontinent, but it seems she didn’t defecate, so she must have made sure her stomach was empty the previous day so that her suicide didn’t become ugly.”

Sakurako-san taps my shoulder again. She starts to get up, so I follow.

“If suicide is considered murder, this would definitely be a locked room murder. She probably locked the room tight so that she wouldn’t be disturbed anyone. She must have really wanted to die. Perhaps a suicide note will turn up in the search.”
“Then…”

After all, Kiyomi-san’s death was not a mistake, it was suicide, wasn’t it? That’s not even a question.

“… So I guess it’s good that it wasn’t ‘murder’.”
“Because of suicide… it’s such a sad thing…”

Of course, it’s still not pleasant if it’s murder. However, the result is too painful. I cover my face.

“I see. Though I don’t know how far you can make it on such assumptions. Then the younger sister and fiancé were in a good relationship. What would you do?
“I would cut ties with those two, that’s better than dying!”

It’s those two who are bad! Sakurako-san squints at me when I raise my voice.

“The more human emotions flare up, the more they get in the way. But they still burn. Even if you cut ties with them, it won’t make the past go away. She would be too worried to get married in her younger sister’s presence.”
“Well, she could break up… and find someone better.”
“That’s right, but what if she didn’t want to?”

Sakurako-san slowly blinks.

"What if her love still burns for that man, even after he betrays her?"
"… So it's better to resign yourself and die?"
"Hahahaha"

She suddenly bursts into laughter.

"Sakurako-san…"

I stand idly, sniffing the damp air while listening to her laughter.

"She was pushing herself. In fact, she finally got that guy."
"What do you mean?"
"I don't know for sure if the relationship between the fiancé and younger sister will be written in the suicide note that the police will find. Even in the hospital they work at, they have probably noticed their relationship changing a bit – well, with aspects like bereaved family members and such, it will be hard for them to continue their relationship. Either one, or both were after something that required them to be married, so it's likely the fiancé didn't have feelings for the older sister that died at all.The feelings of remorse and regret will blow cold winds into the relationship between the younger sister and the fiancé.
Actually – did you see the two of them earlier? It seems they're playing with fire, and it might get up to eight hundred degrees if they go too far."
"…"

It seems the temperature for cremation is eight hundred degrees. Sakurako-san laughs as if something is amusing or funny. I don't want to say or hear anything else. Sakurako-san doesn't say anything more, just looks at me silently. We leave to botanical garden without saying a single word, out onto the wide street.

It's already dark outside, and chilly even with my coat. The snow begins to fall again. Sakurako-san quietly opens her mouth, but only the sounds of our shoes on fresh snow echo.

"The dead can't speak, and can't make excuses – that's why nothing can compete. Even though the living are so eloquent, conversations always one-sided, nobody ever listens to each other."

The lights from a number of cars flow in the direction we're headed. Among them, one car bends towards us, and we watch it slowly enters a side street. The light reminds me of the lanterns I saw when I played at my grandmother's house as a child, it's a sad kind of light. (TL NOTE: the lantern is specifically referring to lanterns hung as offerings at grave sites.)

"You said you were sad? I wouldn't be. She was a cunning, self-righteous woman. That woman

gained control over the fiancé's heart through violence, rudeness, and force in a way that made him unable to speak up. It's far from sad, she was a scary woman. Gradually, his heart was eaten away at, like it was poisoned."

Sakurako-san's words pass by my ears dryly.

"… Is that so?"

I sigh while I try to follow Sakurako-san's footprints.

"I can't believe she's really dead – after all this sad talk, it's all I can think about."

As I look up at the sky, white, light, large snowflakes fall onto my eyelids. It's cold, but it soon melts and flows down my cheeks like tears.

"I'm sure she wanted to talk about special people, people she loves, to talk, to blame, to talk badly about others."

Sakurako-san doesn't need to understand. I wasn't very close to Kiyomi-san. However, there's no mistaking it.

"I'm sure Kiyomi-san was a beautiful person with a pure heart."

Final part

That day, there was a report on the evening news in Hokkaido about Kiyomi-san. There were lines about both suicide and murder, but her death was suicide after all, as said in the small corner of the next morning's newspaper. A few days later, my mother heard that Yoshimi-san is leaving the hospital.

"I was surprised that they were having an affair!" My mother says surprise, but I'm not surprised at all.

But I don't want to hear it. And I never want to go weeding at the apartment again. No matter how hot of a day it is, no one will bring me mint tea anymore. It feels like my time with Kiyomi-san passed by in a moment. After all, she didn't change my life extraordinarily before she died. No, just one thing changed. Now, I have a planter in my room with star shaped ivy and heart shaped mint. But that's it. Even now.

Then, a few weeks later, a small article in the newspaper catches my eye. While painting a plastic model, I see the date for the newspaper was 3 days ago.

"This…"

“Doctor whose fiancée committed suicide?”
XX month, XX day, in the early morning, citizens in the neighbourhood suspect a car was parked in the Chiyuubetsu river, with a doctor from the city inside. The body of Hashiguchi Takeyoshi-san (35 years old) was found. Although no suicide note was found, there are traces of burned briquettes in the car, and since Hashiguchi-san’s fiancée passed away last month, this case up to the police. Although it’s said that the possibility of suicide is high, we are proceeding with the investigation carefully.

My hand that’s holding the plastic model shakes. I don’t know whether it was because of shock, sadness, or anger.

“… Then why didn’t you just care more about Kiyomi-san?”

On that day when Hashiguchi-san stood in the snow and passed away, a tear rolled down my cheek. I wonder if he did such a foolish thing just to chase after her with regret. If you loved her, why did you betray her? Now that she’s been left all alone, I wonder what Yoshimi-san is doing.

I wonder if Kiyomi-san would really be satisfied with this. I wonder if a story like this would make her happy in heaven. I’m detestable. Even so, I pray from the bottom of my heart that those two souls can be happy.

Second Bone: Head

Part one

The third week of May.

The long, harsh winter has ended, and the trees are striving to be the first to spread their leaves, making the start of summer. The kuril cherry blossoms bloom their pale flowers along the highway I am on with Sakurako-san, in her Renault New Kangoo. The sky is pale blue, the sunlight is warm, and the flowering scenery is beautiful.

Cherry blossom trees usually bloom around the graduation ceremony, or flower at entrance ceremonies, but here in Hokkaido, they flower around golden week. So “The cherry blossom trees are blooming” is filled with excitement, like saying “Let’s go on a trip!”, rather than the start of spring.

The major cherry trees Hokkaido is the yoshino cherry tree, but the 4 kinds native ones are the kuril cherry tree, the ezoyama cherry tree, the korean hill cherry tree, and the miyama cherry tree. I especially like the kuril cherry trees. The yoshino cherry trees scatter later, since they bloom for a long time. When they start to bloom they are a vivid red, but turn white when they are about to fall.

I’m not usually very familiar with flowers, however cherry trees are special. When I was in grade 4, my grandmother, who loved cherry trees, died. Now, when I look at cherry trees, I remember my grandmother kindly teaching me, saying things like “this is a sargent cherry tree.”

I wonder if that’s why I find it so nice to go for a drive and watch the cherry blossoms on a nice day like this. Even if the driver is Sakurako-san.

“… What’s wrong?”

I look at Sakurako-san’s profile as she clasps the steering wheel, she looks puzzled, and has one eyebrow raised.

“Nothing. I was just thinking that I didn’t know you could drive.”
“Is that so?”
“It’s because we use a taxi all the time.”

Although she’s a lady, unless she had a “butler” or “chauffeur”, Sakurako-san’s main means of transportation is always taxi. In addition to not knowing she has a license, I didn’t even know she has a car.

“Last year I rendered one car useless.”

“Was it an accident?”
“No, a deer.”
“Deer? You hit a deer?”

The deer is the wild animal that people in Hokkaido fear most. They jump out so suddenly, they’re so big… It’s not uncommon for it to total a car. Sakurako-san would probably just shrug her shoulders at an accident like that, while someone like me would be very startled.

“No, it wasn’t an accident. I got lucky and found a deer carcass, but it was midsummer, so it was quite decomposed.”
“Huh…”

She doesn’t have to say anything more for me to imagine what happened.

“Since it was a wild animal, fleas and ticks inhabited the car, and it’s difficult to get rid of the scent of decomposition. I didn’t care, but gran and Naoe were bugging me about it, so I got rid of the car.”
“Well yeah, no one would want a disgusting car like that! Unlike you, most people can’t stand the scent of corpses like that!”

Besides, fleas and ticks… It’s a bit frightening how resistant Sakurako-san is to the scent of corpses. I feel bad for not only gran, but Ariwara-san as well for needing to put up with “the scent of death”.

“Well, we don’t go out much in winter, so it’s okay to take a taxi, but it isn’t as good for gathering bones. Even just one rabbit smells, so you’ll get refused by the driver.”
“Obviously.”
“So that’s why I bought a new car.”
“Wow.”

But if Sakurako-san owns the car, won’t it end up the same way? While thinking about how pleasant the car is, I start to gently relax my eyes. It’s a car that you don’t see much around here, only an oddball like Sakurako-san would have one. I really like this car, so I beg from the bottom of my heart that she never puts rotten animals in her car again.

“Is this the first time you’re driving this car?”
“Oh, are you worried I’ll get into an accident because I’m inexperienced?”
“…”
“I’m just joking.”
“Please stop with the nonsensical jokes.”

Contrary to my expectations that it would be frightening, Sakurako-san’s driving is better than I thought. Although her car’s interior is comfortable, her handling is dexterous, and her reflexes

aren't bad, Sakurako-san's driving doesn't feel as stable and secure as my mother's, who has been driving for years. Thus, I spend my sunny Sunday morning in Sakurako-san's car.

"Where are we headed?
"Mashike."
"Mashike?"
"I want to go by the ocean."
"The ocean… sounds good."

I see. It's a good choice for a first drive in a new car, but it's hard to think that Sakurako-san made such a wonderful choice. Especially for Asahikawa citizens, who are surrounded by mountains, playing in the water means in the river (Asahikawa is a city with many rivers), the sea is a special place.

Blue sky, a new car, cherry blossom trees, and the ocean – such lovely words, I'm completely ecstatic. But I wonder why I didn't notice "this" at this point.
Sakurako-san is the one next to me. This can't only be for having fun. I shouldn't forget all those times. Sakurako-san is always calling for dead bodies.

Part two

Mashike is in the southern part of Rumoi, located about 2 hours by car from Asahikawa in northwestern Hokkaido. It has a population of about 5 000 people, and it's famous for fruit and fishing. Although people sometimes talk about the catchy name, the origin of the town's name is Ainu, and it seems to be "Mashukini", meaning "a place with many seagulls", or "Mashuke". In the past there was a lot of seagulls, but now the herring is harvested a lot, I hear.

When you talk about Mashike, people usually think of shrimp rather than herring, though. The haul of button shrimp in Mashike is one of Japan's best. The plump, sweet shrimp are plentiful, and just seeing the package is hair-raising. It's said that Japanese citizens eat 3kg of shrimp per capita, per year, but I might eat more. Even if it's said to be a child's taste, my favourite food is fried shrimp, and if a large piece of shrimp is put on udon or soba, it will put me in a good mood every time. Well, since I love shrimp so much, I inadvertently accepted Sakurako-san's offer of "I will let you eat a big bowl of shrimp with plenty of sea urchin for lunch, so help me out for an hour until lunchtime."

"…Weren't we going on a drive today to celebrate your new car?"
"We did go on a drive, it took 2 hours."
"I guess you're right…"
"Fresh greenery, the sea, blue sky… What are you dissatisfied with?

Standing on the sandy beach in the hot summer, I look at Sakurako-san with a discouraged face, and a wrinkled brow.

“So, what are we doing here?”
“Picking up bones.”
“…”
“A lot of bones get washed ashore at the ocean. If you’re lucky, you might find whale bones.”
“Whale bones…”

I think about what we’d so with such a big thing, and at the same time, if there was still flesh attached… I can’t hide my fear.

“Don’t make that face. Anyway, I wonder what’s for dinner. Right now in Mashike, it’s a popular season for shrimp fishing. Gran has given me orders to buy a lot. I’ll be able to eat as much sweet shrimp as I want tonight.”
“… That certainly sounds nice.”
“So please be an obedient helper.”

As I have said before, I dislike these disgusting things… the thoughts of “this person won’t understand no matter how I say it” and “I want to eat delicious shrimp” are jumbled in my head. But what if we were to bring a whale into the car, and I had to ride with it on our way home?

“By the way… what is the probability that we’ll find whale bones?”
“I don’t know the probability, but I have found them a few times.”
“I see…”

Is that so? If such big bones washed ashore frequently on this sandy beach, it would be a bit scary. I feel a little relieved, so I nod with a big sigh.

“Well, it’s only for an hour.”

Well, it’s a good thing we have nice weather today. I guess light exercise before a meal isn’t a bad idea, either. All I wish is that the bones are completely skeletonized. I give up, and follow Sakurako-san, as she walks across the sandy beach. The skinny jeans she’s wearing today emphasize her beautiful legs.

“I can smell the ocean.”

I take a deep breath while I try to pull myself together. It’s really been a long while since I went fishing at the ocean. When I inhale, filling my chest with the salty sea air, I realize that my stomach feels empty.

“Naturally, since we are at the ocean.”
“That’s right.”
“The odour is dimethyl sulphide, produced by marine plankton. It’s the same smell as bad

breath, and rotten cabbage."
"Bad breath…"

Don't expect even a fragment of emotion coming from this person.

"But do bones really show up that much?"
"Bones are everywhere. It's just that not everyone notices them."
"Huh…"

Being told that, I guess I haven't noticed them. I guess it would be serious if everyone noticed bones everywhere…

"Here, too."
"Huh?"

Sakurako-san smiles while pointing at my feet.

"This is?!"
"Ah."
"…"

Looking at my feet, I see a so-called "bone", a brown, cylindrical object.

"What's wrong?"
"No… is this one real?"
"Are there fake bones?"

I didn't ask anything strange, but Sakurako-san is looking at me like I'm stupid. I think my reaction is normal. Because it's a "bone" without anything else.

It's hard to think that "this", which embodies awe and hatred of "death", is just sitting here so casually

"Well, this isn't a human, right…?"
"A human?"

As she speaks, she bursts with laughter.

"You don't need to laugh at me so much…"
"Well, mammals are all the same."
"Mammals? Well, is it a dolphin?"
"A dolphin? I would be happy if it was a dolphin, but it's probably a fox femur, based on the size."

“A fox femur?”
“That’s right, the longest, and sturdiest bone in a mammal’s body.”

While saying that, Sakurako-san strokes down her thigh to show it. The captivating action helps me calm down, as I look at the bone in front of me. Even though you hear that bones are white when there’s no flesh, there are yellow and reddish brown stains in some spots, reminding me that these are the “bones of a living fox”.

“Well…”

I lose my appetite all at once. When they’re alive, a fox is fluffy and cute, so why I feel such physiological hatred as soon as it’s a piece of bone is a complex feeling.

“So… do you want to take it?”
“No, I already have a splendid fox body at home.”

As she says that, I decide to help collect bones on the beach more, despite not feeling up to it. In all honesty, I’m hoping I don’t find any. Since it would be disgusting to use my bare hands, I get some nitrile gloves from Sakurako-san. I’ve heard that synthetic rubber stretches less than natural latex, but it doesn’t fit to your finger as well. Nevertheless, I cautiously put the gloves on, feeling strangely relieved when the rubber fits to my fingers. It’s strange how something so thin, like this rubber glove, can give such a sense of security, and reduce reluctance to such an extent. I chase after Sakurako-san’s footprints that she’s leaving in the white sand.

Although I don’t feel like I’ve gotten much better, looking for something hidden is fun like a treasure hunt. I feel like I’m just thinking that to inspire myself (almost like I’m deceiving myself) as I walk through the sand. There is coarse gravel mixed in with the sand, and some stones that are bigger than my fist. Because of that, the sky is blue, but the ocean looks grey.

While walking, I see broken shells, beautiful stones, agate, and pieces of glass washed up by the waves pass by, one by one. I never come to the ocean, other than fishing, and I don’t think I’ve been swimming in the ocean since I was in elementary school. Although it’s for the purpose of finding bones, exploring the beach like this is enjoyable from time to time. Of course I don’t hope to find jewels or anything, but finding something would be nice. Alright, my goal for today is to find beautiful shells that aren’t broken – while thinking about that, my foot hits a white lump.

I pick it up to see it’s thin, white, and twisted. It looks like a bone from a fish or a small animal. It could be a pelvis, the head of a fish, or something else.

“What’s this? A bone fragment?”

I immediately show the spoils of war to Sakurako-san.

“No, it’s probably a shell. It’s probably the interior of a big conch, like a tsubu.”
“What a shame.”

Sakurako-san shakes her head slowly, with a smile on her face. I notice that I might be starting to enjoy finding bones. I feel a bit embarrassed, and throw the shell towards to ocean. I’m sure I have quite the sulky face right now. She looks at my expression and laughs with a smile.

“Boy, do you know that there are shells in the human body, too?”
“Like a shellfish?”
“There is a bone called the scapula. It has a common name, though.” (TL NOTE: the first character in scapula (shoulder blade) is the same as the character for shell/shellfish)
“Scapula?”

No, I don’t know – I shake my head, and she strokes the base of my shoulder, and laughs.

“My shoulder?”
“The common name is the shoulder blades. It’s called that because it’s flat and curved, like a bivalve shell.”

Sakurako-san picks up a cracked, flat shell, and places it on my palm.

“Huh… I wasn’t aware of that.”
“But for today, I want bones, not shells. I would warmly welcome a human’s scapula, though.” (TL NOTE: Again, the scapula/shell thing. She would warmly welcome a human’s “shell bone”)

She shakes her index finger at me in a “no” gesture, then turns away and continues her search for bones. Sakurako-san has to be joking. I absolutely don’t want to pick up any human shoulder blades… I wonder if she thought I was looking for shells. How could she think that after I threw that flat shell into the ocean? I thought I threw it pretty far, but due to air resistance or using too much force, the shell landed closer than I intended. Somehow, I feel like I’ve been fooled by the shell.

After I get a lecture about bones from Sakurako-san, and decide to give my undivided attention to her orders. I don’t like large shells that I can’t eat. Anyway, are there even any bones around here? During swimming season, Hokkaido citizens usually grill meat when they visit the beach, sometimes even spare ribs and chicken that falls right off the bone. There is nothing to do now.

Sakurako-san is walking through the rough sand behind me. Summer still seems too far away, so I chose to wear a long-T today. As the sun rises, it starts to get hot in the sunlight. While wiping away the sweat that starts coming to my forehead, my foot suddenly hits something hard.

“…Oh.”

I look down, and see a delicate, white object buried in the sand. My intuition says it's not a stone or shell.

"Aaah!"

I involuntarily let my voice out. I crouch down and put my hands in the sand.

"Wow… I really found something…" I murmur, while digging.

Something like a small bone is buried in the sand, so I grab it.

"What's this?"

Sakurako-san notices, and quickly walks up to me. I brush off the sand carefully, as to not change the position of the bone as much as possible.

"This is wonderful. It's a big harvest."

Sakurako-san stands next to me, and lets out a rising whistle.

"This is?"
"Ah. It's probably a seal. It's in very good condition. You're very lucky."

Her excited, glad voice makes me feel good. There aren't very many times when Sakurako-san has praised me like this. Moving the sand away from the bones makes me feel like an archeologist. Sakurako-san takes out a digital camera, and takes a picture of the position of the bones. She then takes sealable bags out, and labels them "head", "chest", etc. with a magic marker.

"Is this all? Did you see anything else while you were digging around here?"
"Maybe."

It seems like we dug up the main bones. I look at the sand again, looking at the surrounding area. Just as I thought, another small, white, slightly yellow lump touches my hand.

"Is this the head?"

I dig up the surroundings, but it seems this is the only one. I get a strangely disappointed feeling when I pick up the bone. The jaw is large, with a long rows of teeth. I ask Sakurako-san "Is it a seal?" but she only blinks at me, instead of replying.

"Sakurako-san?"
"…Where did you pick that up?"

“Huh? Right here.”

I point next to the seal I dug up, and tilt my head.

“Please show me.”
“Is this from a rare animal?”
“No… That’s not it. These are bones from a very common animal.”

What? I thought I was definitely digging out some special bone. I’m feeling somewhat discouraged.

“Hmm…”

Sakurako-san nods while she looks over the bones.

“Well, do you not want it?”
“No, I’m very happy.”
“You are? Really?”

Sakurako-san smiles, making me feel relieved. I was confused, because she said it’s a common creature. She then she compares that bone, holding it up beside my face, making my stomach feel cold.

“Wh-what is it…?”
“A child, female…”
“Huh?!”

I have a bad feeling.

“Please wait a moment! What is this bone?!”
“A human.”
“Hu…”
“It’s part of a skull. To be accurate, the upper mandible and right cheekbone. Good find.”
“Th-that’s… not… right…”

Sakurako-san gently brushes my head, with the skull in her other hand. I, on the other hand, am not happy at all. Rather, I wish she wouldn’t touch my head with her bone-hands.

“Stop that! Throw it away! Quickly!”
“What are you screaming for? It’s just a bone. The flesh has come off cleanly.”

You’re is the crazy one for not shouting – I swallow those words, and get away from her and the human bones. Sakurako-san eventually digs out part of the parietal bone, the so-called lid of the

skull, from the sand.

“I wonder if there was an accident at sea or something?”
“Maybe. However, there is always the possibility of a cerebral contusion from her head being beaten.”
“-Huh?”

What? I’m at a loss for words, because in Sakurako-san’s hand is only one part of the skull, only the top of the head and upper jaw. It seems Sakurako-san can figure out the cause of death from just a small fragment.

“It seems something hard struck the head sharply.”

But Sakurako-san is making a strangely confident assertion.

“Umm… do you know why there is only this part of the skull?”
“Here.”

I can’t look her in the eyes, so I turn away, but Sakurako-san beckons me. I don’t want to approach her, but if I don’t, she’ll just come to me. In that case, I’ll just go on my own, so I reluctantly approach Sakurako-san. Sakurako-san calls me over next to her, and sticks the parietal bone fragment in my face.

“Uugh!”
“Please look. Does there seems to be a depression here?”
“A depression… That’s right…”

I close my eyes right away, so I can’t really tell if there was a depression or not, but I answer anyway. Can Sakurako-san not tell on her own? I may be behaving like a spoiled child, but I’m happy I don’t have to see it anymore.

“So… What is the depression?”
“You know how the area around the depressed part is swelling? That would be from a blunt object with a relatively small surface – a pole, for example. With a strong blow, the depressed part caved in, and the surrounding area swelled as compensation. It was probably a woman. She was Asian. The age isn’t clear, but they were probably young, considering the tooth damage.”
“You can understand that much?”
“Of course.”

To my surprise, Sakurako-san smiles and laughs.

“You see, the skull is one of the most eloquent bones. First of all, the parietal bone. In general,

women have more of a slant on theirs. The U-shape of this row of teeth is a feature seen in Asians. Caucasians have more of a V-shape. Asians have a shallower palate. Depending on economic situation, and lifestyle, the state the teeth are in can be a good indicator for age."

While saying this, Sakurako-san takes out a plastic bag and seals the jaw bone inside of it.

"Huuuh?! P-please wait a minute!"
"What?"
"You're not planning on taking that home, right?!"
"Is there a reason I shouldn't take it home? Human bones are a rare find."
"That's obvious! A rare find… There's no reason to pick it up in the first place! We should leave it here and call the police."
"Why? Nothing would ever come of it, and it belongs to me!"
"Belongs to me… what a stupid thing to say!"

Really, really, what a person! My voice is quite stern.

"Absolutely not! That is a crime!"
"It's fine, as long as you keep quiet, nothing will happen."
"That's not the problem! This is a problem of morals! It'll also be a bother to gran and Ariwara-san!"
"…"

Sakurako-san doesn't like living beings. Only a few people get her trust – her fiancé/childhood friend, Ariwara-san, and gran, who is almost like a blood relative to her (I secretly think I should be included there, now). So, it's a last resort to get Sakurako-san's attention by using Ariwara-san's name. I don't like talking to her like this, and I don't want to use it, but it's terrible this time.

"These are the bones from a victim who was beaten to death. I don't know what kind of crime it is to take it home, but isn't that a problem for you? Is that okay? Also, if you took that, we'd both get in trouble!"
"…"

Sakurako-san pouts, hugging the skull to her chest as if she's a child having a toy taken away.

"Don't make that face."
"I don't care, I want this!"
"And I say it's pointless! Now, put it on the ground immediately, or I'll call gran!"
"…You really are an inflexible man."
"I'm done listening to you. Leave the bone here, and I'll report it."
"The police are so troublesome, I hate it!"
"I can't help it, we're the ones who found it!"

I hate these troublesome things, too, but I found it, so it's inevitable. Sakurako-san hates the idea of letting go of the skull so much that she sits down in protest on the sand, still hugging the bones.

"Why is it always like this…"

She glares at me while I call the police. I wonder how many times I've called 110 with this phone.

Part three

The police unexpectedly show up in just a few minutes. The police officer says, "I'm Yamaji". He is a young man in his thirties, with dark eyebrows, a so-called "old fashioned handsome". He has a tough smile, and tanned skin.

"A lot of people have been discovering corpses."
"Er… Right."

I respond to the questions Yamaji-san asks me, but they seem to be unnecessarily confusing. I only respond to the questions after making eye contact with Sakurako-san.

"I said it's a corpse, but it's actually just a bone."
"Bone?"
"Yes, it's probably a part of the skull."
"This is it." I say, as I fearfully present the skull to the officer.

Of course, I don't like touching these things with my bare hands, so I use a handkerchief and gloves. Still, I have this awful feeling like I'm getting dirty with "something", like a strange poison is slipping through the cloth and vinyl.

"… Is this really a human?"

Yamamoto-san seems puzzled. He doesn't take it immediately, though I wish he would. I don't want to look at it, but I'm so disgusted while waiting for him to take the bones.

"Uhh… Yes, it is."
"Really? It's not a dog or a seal?"

I'm sure it's hard to understand that these are from a human. The moment I hesitate to explain, Sakurako-san interjects.

"A characteristic of mammals is that the teeth are firmly fixed to the jaw bone. From the

rounded shape of the jaw, you can tell it was an animal without a snout. It's the same with the teeth. For example, a monkey. Monkeys and humans have the same number of teeth, but they have different types of teeth, such as canines. It doesn't seem it's a very fresh bone – do you need an explanation?"
"… That was a lot, and very detailed."

Sakurako-san speaks with an irritating tone, causing Yamaji-san's face to become serious.

"You're just ignorant."
"Sakurako-san!"

It was already bad as it was. I hurriedly try to clear up the bad air between those two.

"Umm, Sakurako-san had an uncle who she was very close to that did autopsies, so she is very knowledgable about animal bones, and skeletal specimens."
"Autopsies?"

The police officer glares at us like we we're suspicious, and deepens the wrinkle between his eyebrows.

"That's right, he was a university professor in the forensics department, but it seems he did autopsies at the police's request. He has retired due to illness, now."

I look at Sakurako-san's facial expression, to see if it's okay to talk about, but she already lost interest in the conversation, and is looking at the skull. I feel bad about it, but I tell her uncle's name to Yamaji-san. He must have heard the name before, because his facial expression changes.

"Really? Professor?!"
"Oh, you know him?"
"Know him… He's a famous professor!"

Apparently her uncle is more well known than I had imagined. Yamaji-san says, "That's right, his niece. That's surprising." After muttering to himself, he turns his head to face us (or Sakurako-san). I wanted him to take the skull before all this.

"That's why Sakurako-san says there's no mistaking it."
"Haa… Since you're saying all this, I'd like to deal with this incident, but another one has happened. This is frustrating."
"An incident?"

The officer finally reaches out to take the skull from me, so I hurriedly press the skull into his hands, but he fails to pick it up.

“Waaaaaa”

Almost at the same time, Yamaji-san and I scream, and both drop the skull. Both of us are trying to catch it, after all, we dropped it onto the sand. This is dangerous. Something like this can only end badly…

“So what is the incident?”

Sakurako-san gently picks up the skull, completely uninterested in our comical figures. She gently brushes the sand off, while speaking to the police officer.

“Well, you see, we found Dead Body-san near here.”
“Close to here… Did it come from the ocean?”
“That’s right. A place around 5km from here. It’s a drowned corpse, though.”

Soon after the cold sweat from our game of beanbag dries… Fear creeps up my spine again. If we had gone just a bit further, we could’ve found the corpse.

“I thought the incident could be related to Dead Body-san, but you found a corpse. Bones don’t get cleaned so beautifully overnight.”

With a forced smile, Yamaji-san extends a hand to take the skull from Sakurako-san. It seems he’s pretending to be calm, but is really disgusted by touching the bone.

“You came here quickly, right? It was a little surprising.”
“Hahaha, well, if you keep it a secret, I’m actually pretty enthusiastic about my work.”

Yamaji-san smiles refreshingly, then leaves the skull where it was and returns to his car. Although it’s likely a separate case from the drowned bodies, human bones being found can’t be ignored. Yamaji-san gets in touch with his coworkers on a wireless radio. On-site inspection began after a while. I am told we have to go talk about the skull at the police station, so I get in the police car and head there

Riding in a police car for the third time in my life (even though I haven’t done anything bad), makes my heart rate rise, and makes me feel nervous. I wonder why. Yamaji-san laughs while looking at me in the rear view mirror.

“Want me to turn on the siren?”
“No thank you! Isn’t it wrong to turn it on when it isn’t an emergency?”
“There isn’t a problem, because it’ll prevent danger of people speeding, or ignoring traffic lights.”

According to Yamaji-san, knowing a police car is nearby has a crime deterring effect. Nonetheless, we don't have an emergency right now. Yamaji-san calmly starts the car, without turning the lights on. First, Yamaji-san asks us a lot of questions. I guess he was trying to learn more about us, while pretending it was normal chit-chat. Sakurako-san ignores most of the questions, unlike me, who is answering obediently to help with the investigation. She exudes an aura that says she can't be bothered. Sakurako-san is being unfriendly, and not very interested in the conversation, but after a bit of silence, she suddenly says, "a specimen, huh…". Yamaji-san opens his mouth.

"Do you like skeletal specimens, like they have at elementary schools?"
"…Those are not real bones. However, they're not unusual to donate to a school or museum."

Sakurako-san suddenly lets out a laugh. If bones are the topic, Sakurako-san is sure to be talkative. Yamaji-san's face reflected in the mirror is a bit distorted. Apparently Yamaji-san is a sharp person, with a good head on his shoulders.

"Oh, that reminds me, I saw a fox skeleton at the local museum."
"They generally don't like large animals there because it's time consuming, as they have to drill small holes in the bones. Animals of a size that can be simmered in a pot are often brought to schools. They take bones from universities and such."
"A pot?!"

Yamaji-san raises his voice in disarray. I understand that feeling well. Until I met Sakurako-san, I also had no idea about the work of simmering bones in a pot.

"Does the flesh disturb you? If you simmer it in a pot, the flesh should fall off in a few days, depending on the size."
"W… Well, I thought such things were just melted with chemicals, or buried in the ground."
"There's other methods, like burying it in the ground, or getting insects to eat the flesh, but those take a lot of time. Also… For example, there are dermestid beetles that eat muscles, but don't eat ligaments, so you can make specimens with the bones, but can't get the grease out of the bones."
"Is it a problem if you can't extract the grease?"
"First, it looks bad. After all, white bones are beautiful. If there's any grease left, it leaves the peculiar smell of organic matter."

In other words, the smell of decomposition.

"Is that so…" Yamaji-san says with admiration.

I don't know if he's acting, or if those are his true feelings, but Sakurako-san seems very pleased.

“When preparing specimens, I use a variety of chemicals, such as denture washer, but I normally don’t dissolve the meat itself with chemicals. I usually only bury things in the ground when they’re too big to fit in the pot. It takes too long for it to become bone, and it’s troublesome to assemble when the bones become scattered. If it’s big enough to get in the pot, I can peel the fur, skin, and fat, divide it into blocks, and put it in a gauze bag, so as to not lose fragments.”
“Divided into blocks…”

Yamaji-san is earnestly listening, but I already knew what she said. After finding a topic that catches Sakurako-san’s interest, she won’t stop talking, even after Yamaji-san’s face becomes cloudy. Of course, even though they’re dead, it’s difficult for ordinary people to accept things like stuffing dead animals into bags, and simmering them. Although I’m aware that Sakurako-san doesn’t kill living animals, the act of chopping up animal carcasses seems taboo somehow – if you mention it to her, though, she’ll just say “it’s not all that different from cooking.”

“Well, anyway, about the bones we found. The body was probably beaten to death.”
“You can figure out that it was beaten to death with just that much?”

Yamaji-san raises his voice in surprise, even though Sakurako-san gave the same explanation as I did. After he finishes listening, Yamaji-san says “Is that so” again, and points outside to change the topic to something else.

“Ah, there it is, the other scene. The bodies from a lovers’ suicide have turned up.”
“Lovers’ suicide?”
“Yes, a man and a woman with their hands tied to each others’” Yamaji-san says.
Sakurako-san suddenly says, “Turn off the car.”
“What?”

Yamaji-san’s voice overlaps with mine.

“I want to see if the corpses are still there.”
“I expected this…”
“I won’t hinder you, I only want to see.”

Like a child, Sakurako-san jolts the lock on the door with her plea.

“You can’t, Sakurako-san.”

Sakurako-san scowls at me while I try to control her.

“This is such a rural area that it’s probably not an incident. Of course I will investigate, I’ll take a look at the bodies. I’m an upper class person, so I haven’t experiences very many cases like this.”

The case with Dead Body-san will probably clear up quickly, but it seems it will take some time for judgement to come. Yamaji-san continues talking.

"Why can't I see the lover's suicide?"
"Well, because it's just man and woman that have their hands tied together."
"…. As long as there are humans there, a case can happen whether it's a city or the countryside. No matter where you are, as long as there's two people, someone can commit murder there."
"You're right, but…"
"I just need to look. I won't touch anything, or hinder you."
"Haa…"

Yamaji-san mutters to himself again… I feel uncomfortable. This request is strange no matter how you look at it. Surprisingly, Sakurako-san's zeal pushes Yamaji-san, so he stops the car.

"….Well, only for a minute."

Sakurako-san smiles happily at those words that he had spit with a sigh, but Yamaji-san doesn't seem to be as excited with this occasion. Sakurako-san's smiling face is so cute it's almost like it's breaking the rules.

"Is that okay?"
"Well, it's not really okay… We should confirm if there is a relationship between the cases, though."

At the end of the murderous cuteness, Yamaji-san unlocked the door. I wonder if the police are okay with this. I feel anxious, but since this is a rural area, and we aren't directly committing a crime, maybe I'm just overreacting. I myself didn't want to see the corpses of a lovers' suicide, but I feel awkward letting Sakurako-san run off on her own, so I reluctantly get out of the car and chase after her. After reaching the crime scene, we see a sour looking, middle-aged police officer standing outside of the yellow tape, glaring at us.

"What's wrong?"

The middle-aged police officer quickly asks Yamaji-san.

"Nah, I just thought the cases might be related, so we should confirm if they are."
"Again? It's just a bone, right?"
"No, that's not why."

Disregarding the conversation, Sakurako-san enters the tape without permission.

"Ah, wait, you can't go in there! You two!"

I helplessly pursue Sakurako-san, while the confused, middle-aged police officer chases us. Thanks to being stopped by a middle-aged police officer, I don't have to see the dead body directly. Sakurako-san, however, looks down at the corpses, which have already begun to give off a stench. She rips off the blue sheet, and makes a rising whistle.

"The condition is okay. There isn't much swelling at all. It seems they weren't in the water for too long."
"Kujo-san!"
"Why did you bring her!" Yamaji-san is being yelled at by the middle aged police officer, while calling for Sakurako-san. Sakurako-san puts on her rubber gloves with a snap, and pouts.
"Don't touch it! Alright! Let's go, you're being insane!"

I hurriedly yell in a sharp voice, but she wrinkles her nose in dissatisfaction. I swallow the stomach acid that comes to my mouth from the fish-like smell of rotting corpse.

"You're such a stubborn man."
"Sakurako-san this is too unreasonable!"

Sakurako-san seems to have given up, returning with the intense scent of death. This is why I hate it. The scent of a dead body stays on you, even when you leave it.

Yamaji-san is bowing his head to the middle-aged police officer – he will surely be scolded later. Leaving them aside, I turn to Sakurako-san. I can still smell that harsh scent.

"I won't be able to eat lunch now!"

I take a spray bottle out of my bag. I spritz Sakurako-san a few times with my deodorizing spray, a necessary item. Spraying her may seem like pestering, but I really can't stand the scent. Even if it's just temporary peace of mind, thinking about going to dinner and being sealed in an airtight place like a car after this, I'd like to lose the smell a bit.

"Well, let's go back to the car."

I use plenty of spray all over her whole body, and she lets out a small sneeze. She seems to suddenly remember something, and says "By the way… Could you tell me one thing?"
"Yes?"

The middle-aged police officer returns to us, with an upset look, letting us know he's paying attention.

"Could you tell me about inside the hands?"
"Huh? Inside the hands?"

“This corpse. Isn’t it holding something? Seaweed, or sand, or something.”
“It’s holding nothing. Why does it matter?”

Nanmo = nothing, the middle-aged officer replied in a dialect that is unique to Hokkaido. (TL NOTE: This is probably redundant, but the police officer has an accent that most people wouldn’t recognize. He said “it’s holding nanmo” basically.)

“Is that true?”
“You’re persistent.”

If she asks anything more, it’ll be a bother to Yamaji-san, so I lightly hit Sakurako-san’s back.

“Sakurako-san, come on, please.”
“Alright, I get it.”
“Huh?”
“Well, let’s go soon. I want to finish up and have lunch.”

Sakurako-san walks ahead to the police car by herself, despite being the one who had the car stopped in the first place. Yamaji-san and I follow behind, surprised.

Part four

“It wasn’t a lover’s suicide.”
“Hm?”

Sakurako-san speaks for the first time since we got into the police car.

“W… What?”

Yamaji-san and I exchange glances, while Sakurako-san laughs at how she has made a fool of me again. What does it mean? What is she thinking?

“The knot was too beautiful. More precisely, it was fastened too tightly.”
“That’s… There’s probably a reason for that.”
“The man was wearing a watch on his left hand. Well, like my fiancé, not many people wear their watch on their dominant hand, usually it’s on their non-dominant. In addition, I didn’t see his tie and belt, and it isn’t absolute, but I think he was right handed, and yet tied his right hand to the woman. Isn’t it strange to not use your dominant hand?”
“What if the woman tied it?”

Yamaji-san asks, while looking at the watch on his left wrist. He was holding a pen in his right hand not long ago. He is probably right handed.

“It’s certainly a possibility, I can’t deny that. I’m just saying that if you want to tie your hands so that you’re together in death, isn’t it better to have a strong man tie it? If they’re aware of each other, and both agree, it’s natural to have a strong tie.”

Dying together is surely the place to tie your hands as strongly as possible, so that it can’t ever come apart. It’s natural to tie yourself together with the strongest person.

“What if the man didn’t agree to it?”
“It’s strange for there to be no signs of resistance if he didn’t consent. The man was well-built. I would guess he weighs around 85-90 kg – for one woman to make him lose consciousness, carry him to that place, tie his hands, then jump into the ocean… isn’t that too much hard work?”
“But even once you get into the ocean, won’t you float?”

As I speak, Sakurako-san shakes her head.

“The ocean here is far away.”
“There is certainly…. a shallow, rocky area that isn’t suitable for swimming. Some people say it’s better to close the beach because the swimming area is dangerous, but some people say it’s impossible to completely ditch the area…”

Yamaji-san seems to be making an excuse.

“Don’t you think it’s strange?”
“What?”
“The string is facing towards the top, despite being a bowline.”

The bowline – the king of knots. It’s easy to both tie and untie, but also strong and safe. They’re often used on ships, I learned how to tie one from the fishermen when I went fishing with my grandfather.

“A bowline… would normally be pulled up at the top.”

I tilt my head in confusion while tying an “air bowline”.

“That’s right, but try thinking about if you were tying your hands.”
“My hands…?”

I raise my hands again. First of all, it seems a bit impossible to tie my hand with only one hand. Sakurako-san’s words of “it’s not a lover’s suicide” suddenly seem a bit more real. However, it could be the case that the partner helped him, so I try to tie an air bowline in my head again. Yes, I realize that.

“… Right, the knot will be upside down if they face each other…”

Unlike a reef knot, or ribbon knot, a bowline makes a loop rather than pulling the string sideways, pulling it up. Since the knot is like a figure 8, the top and bottom are clear.

“That’s right. If you tie your hands, the string gets pulled towards your palm. In other words, if it was tied from our perspective, the string would be facing downwards.”
“I can certainly pull the string like that, but it’s very difficult and unnatural. You really don’t have to tie it in such a difficult way…”
“One more thing, you shouldn’t make easy judgements, but there are usually two points that indicate drowning. First, in the hands. Many drowning people will grab seaweed, gravel, algae, or other things in desperation. Even if it is suicide, your body will instinctively go for something, trying to live and help you. A characteristic of a lover’s suicide is that in many case, they will be grabbing their partner’s hair.”
“Partner’s hair…”
“The pain of death surpasses love, doesn’t it? Although they thought of each other when they chose to die, they tried to help themselves, even if they sunk their partner. It’s instinct.”

Sakurako-san says, while trying to stifle a laugh. Yamaji-san and I, however, don’t think it’s funny. We exchange glances, and look downward. The instinct to live is incredibly strong, so strong as to impair your ability to think. Even so, the reality that they drowned together is pathetically tragic.

“But… Are you sure they have to be holding something?”

I ask, but Sakurako-san faintly smiles. Her smile is so innocent, it’s hard to believe we’re talking about dead bodies.

“The second one is the mouth.”
“Mouth?”
“The stimulation from drowning causes the interior of the lungs to exude mucus. When air mixes with the mucus in your lungs, it causes white foam to overflow from your nose and mouth. As we saw, they didn’t have anything in their hands, and there was no foam sticking to them.”
“…”

I hear a muffled sound, and look at the driver’s seat. Yamaji-san is pushing his head against the steering wheel.

“As you say… I don’t think there were any traces.”

After muttering bitterly, Yamaji-san let’s out a deep sigh.

“Therefore, we should consider the possibility that a third party killed the two people, tied their hands together, and threw them in the ocean. They couldn’t have been in the water for very

long.”
“But how can you tell that from just looking at the bodies for a few minutes…?”

Yamaji-san understands, of course, but his voice still sounds irritated and surprised, since he was wrong about the lovers’ suicide.

“It’s simple. You and I differ in the fact that I am hoping that the corpse before me was murdered.”
“Sakurako-san, that’s indiscreet.”

I speak to Sakurako-san like she’s a child, who wants the misfortune of the deceased.

“But it’s the truth. I have no desire to use such a faulty expression, but humans are not wild animals. Unfortunately, human corpses aren’t found so easily outside. So, if I find a dead body outside, I assume they died of unnatural causes. Of course, death by disease is very possible, but I look at it as if a third party was involved – it’s a difference in our preconceived notions. If you do an autopsy, you will find the presence or absence of water in the lungs, the colour of purpura, the biological response of the wounds, etc. – there aren’t very many medical examiners with the police nowadays, so it seems the police don’t like these incidents. If you say it’s a suicide at first glance, you might be able to clean it up as a ‘suicide’ without investigating. Who wouldn’t want to eliminate all the trouble? If there’s justification for it be a lover’s suicide, they won’t want to examine any more. That’s the big difference between you and me.”
“Are you saying that our police don’t want this to be a crime?”
“I’m just saying that it’s normal. Of course there will be police officers who are suspicious, too. It’s not a unique story – what about you? Officer Yamaji. It seems like it’s not lover’s suicide, so you have to find out, and finish it. However, it seems that you have some discomfort about the corpse, so why don’t you let me go see the corpse?”
“…”

Yamaji-san doesn’t respond, but the silence sounds positive to me.

“Well… as a forensic scientist, it’s hard to take on a corpse. Since the budget from the country is limited, the university will be in the red every time someone is killed. The cost of finding the cause of death for one corpse is 200 000, but in some cases it’s even more. Only 70 000 yen comes from the country. Many parts are dependent on their sense of justice and good will to find the truth.”

The “dissection of a body” can be divided into three major types. A forensic autopsy is performed as part of the hygiene administration in cases where the cause of death is unknown, or criminality is suspected. A pathological autopsy is performed at a clinician’s request, or in case of death in a hospital. Whether this case will be forensic or pathological will be up to the police, but there is no official person called a “coroner” in Japan. The so-called “coroner” only exists in three prefectures, like Tokyo, so a forensic professor from the nearest medical

university will have to do. In other words, a person like Sakurako-san's uncle.

"Only 70 000 yen? Isn't it strange that it's so little?"
"That's right. The mass media can easily blame the police for things like the decline in arrest rates, but the nation itself doesn't take cases seriously. There aren't very many doctors that do autopsies, either. Well, even with a corpse that has an unknown cause of death is right in front of you, you don't have to bother opening it up and examining it. Normally they can just fill in the medical certificate with "heart failure" and be done with it. No matter what the police does, it doesn't matter if the body is an unnatural lover's suicide. It's only the bereaved family that disputes the results."

Sakurako-san laughs happily, but neither Yamaji-san nor I can laugh at all.

"Well, this is probably murder. You should look for someone who knows how to readily tie a bowline. Moreover, in order to not jump to conclusions, reinforce it with one more thing. He should be familiar with tying knots. Firemen and fishermen generally know about knots, as well as mountain climbers, but this can't be said unconditionally. It's simple to tie, so anyone can remember it."

It's certainly not a difficult knot, and I even use it sometimes while fishing, but I don't think it's common for people to know about. I was the one who taught Sakurako-san how to tie this in the first place. When tying up newspapers and magazines, it's quick and easy to use a bowline. Even Sakurako-san didn't know until then. It would be natural to think he was someone who is good at handling ships and ropes.

"I saw that both of them were wearing wedding rings, but with different designs. Perhaps they have a family at home, so the bereaved family will also be in the middle of this. If you think about it so far, it seems like a pretty good method for abandonment, but the method is extremely childish. An autopsy can easily reveal whether or not there is water in the lungs, vital reactions, etc. It was cunning, but not very intelligent… Well, it has nothing to do with me. It's not like I'll get their bones."

Sakurako-san leans back deeply into her seat, and folds her hands with sudden satisfaction. She isn't interested in good or bad, she just wants to know the truth. It doesn't matter what kind of crime it is, she can always see the truth.

"It's be fine if you wanted to call it a lovers' suicide."
"No… I will see to it."

Yamaji-san hits his head on the steering wheel, then raises his face and lets out a sigh while he steps on the accelerator, giving up.

"You're a rare kind of person to be a police officer. Can't you get ahead in your career like that?"

“…You may be right.”
“Well, this isn’t the Edo period. These days, those committing a lover’s suicide won’t just join hands and jump into such a shallow ocean. Charcoal, hydrogen sulphide, there’s definitely many ways to die easily.”

I thought the same thing, but the words won’t come out of my mouth. Yamaji-san doesn’t need to be hurt any more. Until we arrive at the station, we all stay silent. Yamaji-san, who has been so friendly until now, works as usual in a reserved manner. I was starting to like Yamaji-san, so I’m a little disappointed with his attitude, but it can’t be helped. Sakurako-san is good at being disliked by other people. Although it’s a bit awkward, Yamaji-san says he will take us back to Sakurako-san’s car.

Inside the car, it’s completely silent. Yamaji-san suddenly says “I’m in your debt for today.” with a scraping voice as we approach the swimming area.

“No, it was no trouble for us.”

I hurriedly bow to Yamaji-san, and see his lonely smile in the mirror. Originally I thought he smiled at me, but it seems it was meant for Sakurako-san. Sakurako-san seems to be bored of the wind instrument music, and turns on her iPod. Sakurako-san likes heavy metal, so she might not have heard our conversation at all.

“Sakurako-san.”

Yamaji-san seems increasingly pitiful, so I nudge Sakurako-san with my elbow.

“What?”
“ Yamaji-san is trying to talk to you, it’s rude to not listen.”
“Talk to me?”
“Ah, it’s fine! It doesn’t matter anymore…”
“…”

Yamaji-san’s silence made me regret opposing Sakurako-san like that. The police car stops behind Sakurako-san’s car, so I get out and thank him with a smile.

“I’m really sorry that took so long, you two still haven’t had lunch.”
“Yeah…”

I glance down to my phone, it’s already 3pm.

“How about you go to my friend’s shop. I think it was a sushi place? The flavour is reasonable, I have good things to say about it. I wish we could’ve had lunch together…” Yamaji-san says with a regretful look.

As we get into the car, Yamaji-san gets out of his car to see us off. Sakurako-san and I both open our windows to greet him. He puts his hand on the driver side window and says “If you get the chance, please visit.” With an even kinder smile than when we met him.

“Right – then, give me the skull I found. If you don’t find a collector, send it to my place.”

Sakurako-san joked with such a serious tone, Yamaji-san let out a laugh. He seemed to receive it as a joke, anyway, though Sakurako-san might’ve been serious. She’s probably dying to get that skull.

“Well then, thank you for your help today.” Yamaji-san says, but he seems lonely, somehow.

The face he’s making makes me want to say something, but I raise the window, and nudge Sakurako-san with my elbow again. Sakurako-san looks at me with a puzzled expression, as if asking “what?” Yamaji-san licks his dry lower lip, and bows as if he’s preparing himself.

“…Even now that he’s retired, your uncle is said to be a god of forensic medicine in Hokkaido… Kujo-san, will you succeed him?”
“I don’t think your mother would forgive you for that,” I say.
“Is that so? She doesn’t speak very highly of her unmarried daughter that cuts up corpses all day, plus I don’t feel like doing it.”
“Is that so?”
“Oh… that’s a shame.” Yamaji-san says, then takes a deep breath.
“…I certainly don’t want to take care of everything, but if I find out that it wasn’t suicide, I’m sure the families will be happy. Well, since I’m just a police box officer, I can’t do a lot, but I’ll raise my voice as much as I can. I won’t let it be brushed off as a suicide.”

The words sputtered out from the back of his throats really stick with me. Even if he can’t guarantee he’ll arrest the culprit, his determination is conveyed quietly.

“First the lover’s suicide, now I’m thinking about the bereaved families…” Yamaji-san mutters.

He looks up at the sky, then tells us “Please be careful” before taking a few steps away from the car. The Kangoo slowly starts to move. When the car starts running, he raises his right hand and bows deeply. Yamaji-san doesn’t raise his head until after we turn the corner and left.

Part 5

The shop recommended to us by Yamaji-san turned out to be quite delicious. I’m having sashimi with soy sauce, and a sea food rice bowl with plenty of fresh sea urchin. Sakurako-san asks for more seafood carelessly. When I try to pay, I find that Yamaji-san had already paid for us… I still feel like I’m obligated to pay for myself. In that case, I’ll try to eat more carefully.

“I guess we had to stop our search for bones after all.”
“That’s right.”
“What should we do? Buy some shrimp and go home?”
“I’m a bit discouraged, so I guess that’s all there is to do.”

After we eat our late lunch, we buy raw shrimp for gran from the Kunimare sake brewery. It’s cheap, as it only costs 3 000 yen. I can’t endure it anymore. I take out a piece like it’s a jewel, and roll the tail in my fingers. It seems a bit cruel to peel the shells while they’re still uncooked, and the shells are firmly stuck to them, making it difficult to crush. It feels like my whole world is changing when I put it into my mouth. It’s delicious, even without soy sauce. Although it isn’t sweet, it has a nice fragrance, and a certain elasticity that puts me in high spirits. They’re so delicious eaten as-is that even Sakurako-san, who seemed disgusted at first, has eaten 20 of them.

The shrimp are very difficult to peel from the shell because if you’re not careful, the body will get ripped in half by the tail. I even toss all the improperly peeled shrimp into my mouth. I cram my stomach full of shrimp, making me feel strangely tired as I watch the scenery flow by. Without that disturbance earlier, I would’ve been happy and full, but unfortunately, I’m feeling quite bitter.

“Sakurako-san, why are you listening to these songs?”

I want to sleep, but I don’t think I’ll be able to. The main cause being an iPod connected to the car stereo, blasting harsh metal, which caused me to ask her.

“The reason why is because there’s no voice superior to that of Diavel from Shiki Mk-II in this world.”
“Huh…”

Shouldn’t a high class lady be listening to classical music? As usual, Sakurako-san throws her incomprehensible logic into the conversation, making me feel a bit defeated. The car runs along the coastline, an old cityscape, and the fishing grounds. While we’re stopped at a light, I see the bus stop beside us and notice that it’s the set of a movie I’ve seen.

“-Ah”
“What is it?”
“Please wait a minute, look, there on the roof!”
“What?”
“Please look, that…”

Sakurako-san stops the car in a parking lot nearby, giving me a strange look. I confirm that Sakurako-san is behind me, and rush to the bus stop. There is something like a white lump of lint on the roof of the wooden bus stop. As I approach, my imagination starts running wild. It isn’t

lint, but the body of a small animal.

“Over here!”

Sakurako-san notices it, and signals for me the crouch.

“What is it?”
“A piggy back ride.”
“Ehh…”

Sakurako-san has good style, but she isn’t very slim. Her waist is thin, and she’s tall. She says, “I have a high bone density. I have very healthy bones.” She seems to take pride(?) in that. She doesn’t look bad, but she’s heavy.

“Let’s get it quickly.”
“I guess it can’t be helped…”

The wind blows against us, while Sakurako-san stamps her feet impatiently. Sakurako-san, who is far from delicate, tells me to put my knee on the ground, but I’m a bit reluctant.

“Well… Please.”

Sakurako-san puts her legs around my neck.

“Okay, good to go up.”

Sakurako-san is heavy as expected. Even if I say I’m okay, I’m not okay at all. However, I can’t say that I can’t do it now. I am a man, after all. Sakurako-san seems to lose her balance when I try to raise my back slowly, so I put one hand and one knee on the ground.

“Isn’t this dangerous?”

Her voice comes down from overhead. It’s a bit embarrassing to grab her thigh to support her, so I hesitate, but today, it’s my only choice. I tell myself that it’s okay, and grab her left thigh. I lift my whole body.

“You’re so weak.”
“Please don’t say that…”

Sakurako-san is heavy, after all. I feel like my neck is going to break, and my shoulders are going to dislocate. However, having Sakurako-san’s thighs on my shoulder isn’t all bad.

“Okay, good to get down.”

“Did you get it?”
“Oh, no problem.”

Although there seems to be several problems here… As I cling to the wall of the bus stop to let Sakurako-san down, the smell of decomposition comes to my nose for the second time today.

“…Ugh”
“A small dog.”

She puts the white lump on the hood of her car, and snorts satisfactorily.

“So it was the carcass of an animal after all…”

It seems to be the corpse of a maltese. It’s fur is white and wavy, like a sheep, and matted with body fluids. It’s infested with insects, the eyes have lose their light, the discoloured tongue is protruding from it’s mouth. With the fine weather today, the puppy must have been decomposing faster than normal. The intense, pungent smell almost makes my shrimp come back up.

“Why is it here…?”
“It’s missing a leg.”
“That’s right… Ah, it has a collar.”

Sakurako-san pulls out a large, sealed bag while looking at the little lump.

“Good. It just barely fits.”
“Sakurako-san?!”
“What? This is mine!”

Sakurako-san immediately starts to put the puppy in a bag. I hit the car hood.

“Of course! If it has an owner, they might be looking for it!”
“I know that.”
“I’m the one who found it.”
“What?”
“Since I found it, I should be able to do whatever I want with it. Since it’s not a seal bone, I want to return it to it’s home.”
“…”

Sakurako-san puffs out her cheeks, then lets out a big sigh before tossing the dead puppy to me.

“Wow, what a great person you are!”

Ignoring Sakurako-san's grumbling, I hold my breath while stretching out the dog's neck. Although I don't want to touch it, I don't have a choice. I carefully remove the collar. It says "Nana" on the front, and there are 10 hidden numbers on the back, starting with 0164. The area code in Asahikawa is 0166, so since Mashike isn't very far away, the area code is probably similar.

"Just as I thought. The back of this collar… it must be a phone number."
"Well that's good." Sakurako-san says bluntly.

I give her a bitter smile, then type the number into my smartphone. The call seems to go through. Nana is still a lost dog. Sakurako-san seems to have calmed down her disappointment, so we head for the owner's house.

Part 6

The house is about a 10 minute drive from the bus stop.

"Oh, you're right. This is Nana."
"It's Nana, dear."

The couple, who both seem to be about 50 years old, take the puppy from me. They wrap the cold body in a towel, hug it close, and cry.

"…It was on the roof of the bus stop, along the road."
"Why was she there?!"

"Why was she there" is probably what it means. (TL NOTE: weird accent again) Since the city is near the coast, the old man has a bit of a strange dialect.

"Come on" I tell Sakurako-san, but she only replies with "bird".
"Bird?"
"This is probably the work of a crow, or a black kite."
"Huh?"
"It probably tried to carry it off as food, but it was too heavy to carry, so it only took the leg, leaving the rest as-is."
"A crow, huh?"

The old man mutters a groan.

"Except there doesn't appear to be any external wounds, besides the lost leg. It seems to have rained recently, so I can't confirm any traces of bleeding. The cause of death is probably blood loss due to losing a leg, or crush syndrome."
"Wow…"

“Inside the muscle cell tissue, the body has proteins called myoglobin and potassium at a concentration twenty times higher than other places. When it receives a shock, such as violent blows or pressure, a lot flows out of the cell. This potassium has a function that stops the heart. The symptoms occur when large amounts of potassium in the blood flow to the heart. This is crush syndrome.”
“In other words… death from shock?”
“That’s right. For example, there’s cases where a human who has been crushed under rubble died shortly after being rescued. This is also the same as death from shock. If you have been crushed for more than 2 hours, and you can’t feel your limb anymore, you should avoid unnecessary rescue. You should only be rescued with the aid of a doctor, who can monitor your heat, hydration, etc.”

I understand that, but I wonder if she has to be talking about that in front of these people right now. Sakurako-san lets out a short breath. I look for the words to say to Nana-chan’s owners, who are silent, and hurry to comfort them.

“…Well, anyway, dogs have abundant amounts of mimetic muscles. As you can see from this puppy’s corpse, it doesn’t seem to be making a face like it was suffering. Doesn’t it seem like the dog died quickly, without much suffering? Death from being crushed should take more than a day to kill someone. It’s a long time to suffer. Therefore, the cause of death is probably the former. If it died from blood loss, this little body would die quickly.”

She seemed like she was sulking for a while, but maybe she’s just being shy. It’s unusual for Sakurako-san, but I’m relieved that she is trying to comfort the couple. The lady finally understands the meaning of Sakurako-san’s words, and tears up while hugging Nana’s body tight.

“It’d be nice if she wasn’t in pain…”
“My grandmother died last week, and I’ve been so busy with the funeral that I didn’t notice Nana was gone. Nana liked my grandmother the most, so I’m sure she was looking for her.”
“So that’s how she got caught by a crow.”

While the old man speaks, the woman rubs Nana’s back through the towel. It’s as if warming up her cold, little body will make it’s soul return to it.

“She was such a good girl, I can’t believe she was kidnapped by crows! Why did it have to be Nana!”

The old lady scolds her unmoving dog, but her sad voice contains a sense of love.

“Maybe this wouldn’t have happened if grandma hadn’t left us…”

It’s easy to understand how loved Nana was in this family by the old man’s words.

“Thank you for visiting. Thank you very much.”
“No, I only brought sad news, I’m sorry for your losses…”

The couple bows to us, so I lower my head in return.

“We can mourn my grandmother properly now, thanks to you.”

I watch the old lady’s tears drip down onto her lap, thinking that today is really a day worth lowering my head for. I can see her scalp through her thin hair. It’s pointless to stay too long, but when we try to leave, the couple invites us in for tea. Sakurako-san tends to say unnecessary things, so I refuse, saying “Well, we came from Asahikawa.”
The old man agrees, and replies with “You should be heading home soon, then.”

It’s already past 4pm. Although we have to go back to Asahikawa, I feel sorry for leaving like this. The old man suggests we take a souvenir. Yamaji-san was nice, too. Maybe people from Mashike just have that kind of personality.

“Would you like some octopus? It’s soft and delicious.”
“Oh… Yes, we’ll take some.”

I feel bad, but I decide to fully appreciate the offer. Homemade dried salmon, dried squid, salted, pickled, and frozen… Gran will be surprised when we return.

“We’re in your debt.”
“Nanmo, nanmo.”

The word “nanmo” which means “nothing” or “you’re welcome” at the same time, can also mean “never mind” and “it’s okay”. I love that.

“Well, I’m sure it will be delicious. Please excuse us.”
“It’s already dark, please be careful.”
“Yes, thank you very much.”
“If you’re in the area again, please stop by.”
“Yes, we will.”

I bow my head as I reply, and turn towards the car. I don’t know if she’s just being polite, but if I visit again, I would remember Nana’s death. Still, I would like to meet again.

Part 7

By the time we return to Asahikawa, my body is overcome with fatigue.

“This dried salmon is delicious.”
“Yeah.”

Although I’m not hungry, I still eat the dried salmon we got from Nana-chan’s owner.

“Today was a pretty unexpected day.”
“Yes, it was.”
“I’m strangely tired.”

I lean back and stretch. The skull on the beach, the lover’s suicide, and the puppy – it has been a tough day. Thinking about Yamaji-san and Nana-chan’s owner makes my chest hurt, but as much as I regret today, it was wonderful.

“Today was meaningless.”
“Please don’t talk like that, at least we found those seal bones.”
“…Oh, it was there!”

Sakurako-san points to the beach where we found the seal and smiles. It’s a pretty smile.

“Next time, let’s go to the forest. There’s lots of bones there.”
“Huh?! No way! I don’t want to!”
“I hope to find a rabbit that’s in good condition. You’d better learn how to remove bones and sort them soon. You seem dexterous, and you’ll improve as you go along.”
“No, thank you.”
“Come on, you don’t have to hold back.”
“I’m not holding back, I just don’t want to!”
“Why don’t you want to?!”
“Wh-! Please keep your eyes on the road when you’re driving! Sakurako-san!!”

Even though she’s supposed to be driving, Sakurako-san turns towards me while I scream and point my finger at the road.

“Anyway, I definitely won’t go with you next time, no matter what you say!”

I don’t like horrible things like bones. I’m not interested in skeletal specimens, or searching for animal skeletons in the forest! Well, I guess I’ll end up tagging along with Sakurako-san anyway. Sakurako-san is always going at her own pace.

A few days later, a fisherman living several kilometres away from where the lover’s suicide corpses were found was charged with murder. It was a quick arrest. The fact that the hands were tied with a bowline that is used by fishermen, the traces of blood in the criminal’s truck bed, the two who were killed has money trouble – with so much evidence, the culprit was easy to find.

Half a year after the incident, when I had almost completely forgotten about Mashike, a large bag arrives at Sakurako-san's house. It's from the inspector who responded to us. I'm further surprised by the entire sea lion skeleton in a box. The included letter reads:

It's Yamaji. I'm very grateful for your help half a year ago. I'm sorry that the report was delayed. Perhaps you already know, but the matter with the lover's suicide has successfully been resolved. My investigation was steady, it's not an overstatement to say that it's all thanks to Kujo-san. The skull you two found is apparently from the end of the Edo period to around the Meiji era, according to the appraisal. As Kujo-san said, it was probably a woman with traces of trauma on the head. Although it's regrettable, it seems it will be difficult to find the criminal.

Although I sent this letter to thank you, my acquaintance who shoots deer also shot a sea lion a long time ago (sea lions have done a lot of damage in Mashike). Although it might not be good because it's a baby, I sent it because I have the whole skeleton.

Mashike is rich in marine products, and the fruit is popular. There is a delicious sake brewery. If you have a chance, please stop by. If at times you feel like it, please help me again. I am very grateful.

-Yamaji Teruhiko

"…He's a really strange man."

Sakurako-san laughs while reading the letter.

"Is that right? Isn't he a good person?"
"Well.. the shrimp was delicious. It's a nice town."
"It really is."

I would like to meet Yamaji-san at least once more. Although I don't know if Sakurako-san would want to meet him again.

"Do you already have sea lion bones?"
"No, I have made a few specimens for other people, but I don't have one for myself."
"That's good, isn't it?"
"You're right."

Sakurako-san nods while closing her eyes and stoking the white bones with her fingers.

"We should go back there in the summer."
"I'd like that."

She seemed to have liked it more than she thought she would. After all, she got along well with Yamaji-san, so as thanks he sends delicious specialty products a few times a year, such as octopus, shrimp, and cherries. Sakurako-san is unable to receive them, so they're delivered to me instead. I also go to see him every year, and taste the sake from the brewery in northern Hokkaido, made from underground water, and for the shrimp, but that's a story for later. By the way, I also happened to meet Nana-chan's owners again after that.

There was a large, fluffy samoyed dog next to the lady. She said "A crow won't be able to take this dog!" It seems that it's name is "Hachi" (apparently Nana was the 7th pet in the house). (TL NOTE: Nana means 7, Hachi means 8)

"Just the other day was the anniversary of my grandma's death. They both have the same brown spot on one foot. I feel like this dog is Nana's reincarnation."

The old lady gently strokes Hachi's head, both of them smiling. It was such a nice smile that I found myself smiling, too.

Third bone: Rose Under a Tree

Part 1

Hanabito highway 237 is nicknamed the “birthplace”, as it’s linked to national route 237, and connects to the neighbouring towns with it’s beautiful landscape. The northernmost area is famous for the English-style garden. The impressive garden was even used in Akira Kuramoto’s drama. Ueno Sayuki’s farm is another one. For the last decade, any time someone in Asahikawa says “rose”, people immediately think of the Chiyoda Rose Garden. The gardens are beautiful in all 4 season, and are enjoyed by tourists.

However, I’m not very interested in flowers, so I don’t go voluntarily. I especially don’t want to visit the Chiyoda Rose Garden after the urban legends that “you’ll split up if you visit as a couple” spread around. …Well, not that I have a girlfriend to break up with.

So one day in July, when Sakurako-san invited me to go to the rose garden, it was a fresh surprise. I haven’t gone to the rose garden since kindergarten. I can’t help but crave the light pink ice cream sold there called Rose Soft, but I’m not sure if they still sell it… I decide to visit Sakurako-san’s place with squid sashimi, the first squid my grandfather caught this year. I’m sure the surprise lunch will be welcomed by her. Although sharing food is good, the real purpose of my visit is gran’s delicious lunch, of course.

My mother has been on a hot spring trip for 2 nights and 3 days since yesterday. She can probably tell from my face that I’ve already had lunch, so I tell her it was just a cup of noodles this morning. She disappears into the kitchen. She leaves for about an hour before returning with chicken zangi with paprika and zucchini, a sautéed asparagus and watercress and salad, and tofu. It’s delicious, it’s like having one of the most famous restaurants in Higashikawa right here.

It’s said that Hokkaido’s food self-sufficiency is 200%. Asahikawa in particular has a lot of “products of Hokkaido”. Even though the quality of the ingredients isn’t always consistent, and the meals you can make a a bit conservative, at least we’re always blessed with delicious rice. Of course, it’s not only the rice that’s delicious.

You could say that zangi is the soul of the Hokkaido people. It’s fried chicken, but we don’t have such a fancy way of saying it. I put my hands together, then bite into the crunchy outside of the zangi, with it’s juicy meat and glittering rice.

It’s Yumepirika, a high-grade rice that’s said to be the Koshihikari of the north. It’s very different from my house, where we just get cheap Nanatsuboshi or Hoshino Yume rice. Well, it’s hard to phrase it properly, but (even though Nanatsuboshi and Hoshino Yume are really delicious) Yumepirika is special. It’s tasty. It’s moderate sweetness, firm yet puffy, rich umami, and texture all make it so irresistible that I can’t help but cram more in my mouth. My older brother, who loves rice, always said, “You can taste the rice in your throat!”, but now I feel like I can finally

understand his words. When gran, who is making tea, sees my enjoyment in eating the delicious rice, she laughs happily.

In my time of bliss, Sakurako-san doesn't miss her chance to remind me about the rose garden tomorrow.
"I'm fine with going, but… isn't it a little surprising that you want to go see the flowers?"
Though it's not as vivid, purple asparagus is still sweet and tasty out of season. While chewing my zucchini in balsamic vinegar, I tilt my head to the side.
"Is it?"
"I wouldn't be surprised if you were after dead animals that are buried under the rose garden."
"What do you mean?"
"Nothing…" I say with a sharp voice, and turn my head away, flustered. Somehow I don't have the courage to explain what I meant.

"Well, it's certainly not because I want to look at flowers. However, I used to be close with the rose garden manager's wife, Shiyouko."
For a moment, Sakurako-san's brow furrows, as if she's thinking about a correction to what she just said.
"Ah, I see… But why do I need to go with you?"
"Now is the season for roses."
"You want to show me because they're pretty?"
"No, you're wrong. I mean that many flowers have already finished blooming. I have to help with the roses before all the fruit is gone."

What is she talking about? Sakurako-san slowly shakes her head. Whatever is means, Sakurako-san isn't the type to try to please me for no reason.
"… That means you go to help with gardening work?"
"Well, I guess. However, rose season is the same as cherry season. When I go to help with the garden work, I always get fresh cherries from Shiyouko's garden. Since you like food, I thought that would motivate you immediately."
"…Well, I can't deny that."
Well, I have a good appetite, and I love cherries, too.
"But if you want cherries, can't you get them at a lot of places at this time of year?"

Asahikawa is between mountains, and has a climate that is suitable for growing all kinds of fruits because of the temperature range. There are many orchards nearby, and if you go to them, you can get a lot of fruit this time of year. Between apple picking, grape picking, and strawberry picking, there's lots of things you can harvest yourself, but for the most cost effective, it has to be cherry picking. It seems cherries ripen from the top of the tree, so if you climb up there, you can gather sweet and delicious cherries. It's nice to climb up there like a Japanese rat snake sometimes. (TL NOTE: I know this sounds weird, I'm laughing, too)

It's more fulfilling and profitable than harvesting other fruit, and you get to eat cherries that are much sweeter and richer than at the supermarket – well, at least in my opinion.

“I guess, but I have something else to do, as well. I’m going to visit my ill uncle on the day after tomorrow, so I wanted to bring flowers as a souvenir.”
“Ah… It’s something like that.”
“If you go there, you will always receive the best flowers, but she forces you to put in some physical labour.”
“… So you want me to do that work?”

I finally agree, and nod. Sakurako-san, who isn’t interested in flowers or people, seems to understand that bringing beautiful flowers to ill people makes them happy. In that case, I, Shoutarou Tatewaki, will go with her.
“That’s fine, I had some spare time today, anyway. It’s good to exercise after a meal.”

I carefully place my chopsticks on my empty rice bowl, then gran unexpectedly stand next to me, holding out her hand. Apparently she’s here to fill my bowl. I tell her “About half is good”, and gran nods, then gives me a heap of rice in my bowl. Now the amount of side dishes is uneven. However, this is also like a challenge. I laugh at my needless anxiety as gran brings out more chicken zangi.

“As always, you don’t eat well.”
“I’m told I have Gastroptosis.”
“Hmm, people often say glutinous people have gastroptosis, but it’s superstition. Humans with gastroptosis have inefficient stomachs, so they have to overeat. Nutrition is also difficult to absorb, making it hard to gain weight. In your case, however, you just have a big stomach.”
“It’s because I’m growing.”
“Surely so. I have plans to go eat with Naoe tonight. Since it’s troublesome, you should come. You mother is absent tonight, right?”
“Huh? That’s fine, enjoy your date.”
“I don’t think it’s a problem.”
“No… You might be okay with it, but Ariwara-san definitely isn’t.”

Since he works in public safety, Ariwara-san doesn’t always know where or what he’ll be doing, but he seems to always be busy. In such a situation, I’m sure he’d like to spend his precious leisure time with Sakurako-san, so I would only get in the way.

“I’d like to go to the rose garden after it’s been so long, but I don’t need you to be considerate of me for dinner." I say with a bitter smile. I feel like I’ve been kicked by a horse. Sakurako-san seems upset that her good idea was rejected. She keeps her lips to her tea with a face that seems unconvinced.
“Well… even if it’s not dinner, you could always treat me to rose ice cream. I would be happy to be your helper.”

Even if it’s just cherries and ice cream, I only have to be bothered with manual labour for a few hours – though I came to regret that decision later. We shouldn’t have visited Shiyouko. As if hinting towards the future, the sky I can see from the window is covered in thick, dark clouds.

Part 2

I think we should leave soon, but gran won't allow it.
"You have to change your clothes!" I'm kept waiting for nearly an hour while Sakurako-san prepares for the trip. I understand that it takes time for women to prepare for an outing, since my mother always makes a fuss. I can't help but wonder what on earth they could be doing in that room. Finally, once I have eaten my handmade pudding for dessert, the ice in my iced tea has turned to water, and my phone's battery is at 1%, Sakurako-san is finally released.

"Really, gran, you always exaggerate. We're just going to get flowers!" Sakurako-san says while pouting. She has a bit of makeup on, and has changed into a white, one piece dress. The long dress is fashionable right now. Her dress isn't pure white, however. It's faintly coloured, like the colour of bones. Sakurako-san's favourite colour. Sakurako-san is wearing a denim bolero, a straw hat, and white sandals. She is undeniably a high class lady.

"What are you looking at?" Sakurako-san is glaring at me for accidentally staring at her.
"Nothing…" I answer in a surprised voice. Noticing just how beautiful a person Sakurako-san is makes me feel a little nervous.
"Okay, let's go."

I say that, but as soon as I get into the car, the sound of Sakurako-san's beloved metal band streams out. Shiki Mk-II vocals, and Diavel shouting "Prison! Tear it up!" immediately disillusions me. I guess she's still Sakurako, no matter how nicely she dresses. The car starts running under the dull weather. I thought we were going to head straight to the rose garden, so I'm confused at why she's starting to head towards the quiet, high class residential area of Kagura.

"I'm going to Ms. Shiyouko's house first." (TL NOTE: "Ms" and "Mr" are different from -san, I'll use them accordingly) She says before I can ask my question. She's driving without getting lost, this must be a familiar way to her.

I'm worried that it'll start to rain as soon as we arrive if we take too long, so I check the weather on my phone. There's both clouds and sun in the forecast, with a 30% chance of rain. Well, I wonder if it'll get sunny now. I leave the website, and get surprised as the car passes through the gate of a mansion. It seems this is Ms. Shiyouko's house.

"Isn't there a house right next to the rose garden, though?"
"The people that live there are a married couple, the garden's exclusive gardeners. Ms. Shiyouko is also good at taking care of roses, and sometimes works at the garden. She's the manager, though, so she doesn't usually take care of the flowers."
"Huh… Well, it would certainly be difficult to care for an area that large on your own."

Since roses take a lot of work, I hear foreign aristocrats liked having them in their gardens. Having beautiful roses blooming in a garden means you have a very capable gardener, making them a status symbol.

Anyway, after arriving at Ms. Shiyouko Chiyoda's residence, we're told by a housekeeper that "She is in the garden", so I follow Sakurako-san there. There is a sweet fragrance of flowers, and roses of various colours such as red, white, and yellow blooming. Passing through an arch of white roses, I see the figure of a woman wearing gloves and holding scissors in front of a rose bush with small-petalled flowers. Is she in her mid-forties?

She's wearing a vinyl coated apron and large brimmed hat, which are usually used in agricultural work, as well as a beige dress that fits her snugly. She notices us, blinks once, then gives a soft, gentle smile. As we approach her, Sakurako-san nods, so I imitate her – perhaps this person is Ms. Shiyouko. Sakurako-san has a cute smiling face, but Ms. Shiyouko's is lovely. It's also charming that a dimple appears at the edge of her mouth, it seems like she's suddenly rejuvenated, and innocent.

"Saachan!" Ms. Shiyouko puts her scissors on the ground, and trots over to us.
"Geez, you're not a kid! Why do you always come over so suddenly?" While speaking, Ms. Shiyouko hugs Sakurako-san's back with one hand, and holds roses in the other.

Unlike Sakurako-san, she's elegant like a celebrity. You can almost see gran's hardships trying to get Sakurako-san to wear a one piece dress, rather than her men's shirt and jeans. Sakurako-san can be a bit wild and masculine. Although they appear to be close friends, it seems Sakurako-san didn't contact her before visiting.

Sakurako-san answers bluntly, "I'm planning on visiting my uncle tomorrow." I wonder why she's acting so rude, even though they seem close (perhaps it's just the way she is.) Shiyouko-san doesn't seem to blame her, as she gently nods and fixes a strand of Sakurako-san's hair that is falling, but then suddenly frowns.

"I'm sorry, but I have guests today."
"I don't mind if it takes a while, just let me know when you have some time."
Sakurako-san says "Please contact Nishijima and his wife." Nishijima and his wife are the couple that manage the rose garden.

We look back at the worker bees flying around the small, purple flowers that are next to the roses. Instead of saying "I'm sorry, I want to make a good choice to show my hospitality", Sakurako-san comes without even contacting them first – I mutter in my head. I didn't say anything because I didn't want to ruin the mood.

The other two start walking, so I panic and try to follow them. Ms. Shiyouko saw me for the first time.
"Are you 'young master'?"
"Huh?"
"Osawa-san talks about you a lot." I quickly bow my head, squint, and notice Ms. Shiyouko is laughing. I return her ambiguous smile without knowing who this "Osawa-san" is. She seems relieved, and heads back to the residence without waiting for me to respond.

“Osawa-san?”
“It’s gran.” I secretly ask Sakurako-san about “Osawa-san” while we walk behind Ms. Shiyouko. Well, thinking about it, I guess she does call me “young master”. I wonder how this celebrity-like Ms. Shiyouko is connected to Sakurako-san so closely.

Ms. Shiyouko takes off her gloves and tells the maid, “Please call Nishijima-san”. From her wrist to her elbow, the glove is made of a pretty floral pattern, but the fingers and palm are made of leather.
“Roses have thorns.” Sakurako-san mutters to me. Isn’t that obvious? I think that for a moment, but I guess that’s her explanation for the gloves. Since a rose has thorns, you would want to protect your hand with thick leather.

Since Shiyouko-san is talking to her maid and making a phone call, I decide to go sightseeing around the mansion. This place is bigger and more splendid than Sakurako-san’s house, so it feels new. Sakurako-san’s house is a western style building with an Asian feel, but Ms. Shiyouko’s house is just western style.

Typical of Asahikawa, a city full of trees, the walls and floor are made of wood, but they’re shiny and polished. That coupled with the large staircase in the main entrance makes it feel like a celebrity’s house. I also like how there’s paintings and sculptures made by local artists, such as Nakahara Teijirou, and Sunazawa Bikky. The interior is beautiful, you can feel the presence of the owner in it, as if their blood run through it.

“It’s my husband’s hobby.” While I look at a sculpture with unique, detailed geometric patterns made by Bikky Sunazawa, Ms. Shiyouko unexpectedly stands behind me and speaks. “Feeling that indomitable will and passion… it gets me excited.”
“That… I think so, too. Like the vitality, or fundamental power of human beings…” I answer, and Ms. Shiyouko squints and smiles, then suddenly looks as if she thought of something when she sees Sakurako-san.
“That’s right! Saachan, you should join us.”
“Join what?” Sakurako-san raises one eyebrow, puzzled, while Shiyouko-san puts her hand over her mouth and laughs mischievously.

“Tonight I’m doing a séance in the salon.”
“Séance?”
“With Mizuki-san from the city council? You said before that an acquaintance of yours does spiritualism. So then, why not try it once? It’s supposed to be quite something.”
“I’ll have Nishijima-san deliver the roses” she adds. After asking Sakurako-san, Ms. Shiyouko turns to me and hits my back.
“You’ll do it, right? Osawa-san might be worried if you leave Saachan alone.”
“Haa…” A séance is not a very celebrity-like way to spend your free time. Although I admire such things, to be suddenly invited to such a suspicious ceremony puts me at a loss for how to answer.

“I’m not interested.” As usual, Sakurako-san cuts into the conversation.

“Don’t say such a thing! It’s a big deal, please join us, Saachan!”
“I politely decline.”
“Geez, don’t be so stubborn!” Ms. Shiyouko takes off her hat and pouts. She looks a bit older without her hat. Somehow, she’s even more beautiful now… She’s that kind of person. It’s not her only her beauty, but her cheerfulness that makes her hard to dislike.

“Actually, my tea-drinking friend was supposed to attend, but… Her husband ate something bad last night, apparently. Another woman is supposed to be going, but she’s not someone I’m personally friends with… Somehow, it makes me a little uneasy.”
“If that’s the case, couldn’t you just not do the séance?”
“Don’t say that. Mizuki-san’s also close with Akihito-san, and I associate with various people. Humans are everything in this world, not everyone can be free like you, Saachan.” I find myself nodding unintentionally.

“Is that okay?”
“Sorry, but I have plans for dinner with Naoe tonight.”
“Oh, I’ll call him, then. Then you won’t have any complaints.” Shiyouko-san finally decides to use force and tells the housekeeper “Please call Nao-chan.” Oh dear. It’s a troubling decision, since Ariwara-san and Sakurako-san can’t just eat together any time.

“How does Ariwara-san know her?” I unintentionally lower my voice so only Sakurako-san hears.
“Though their ages are far apart, Shiyouko-san is Naoe’s cousin. Since she has no children, she used to like taking care of Naoe long ago. It wasn’t unusual for Naoe to spend summer vacation here.”
“Oh, I see…” Finally, the conversation ends.

I finally understand how Sakurako-san and Ariwara-san know each other from their childhood. If Ariwara-san stays here during summer vacation, it’s no wonder Sakurako-san has come here before. Even if Sakurako-san is somewhat impolite, if they’ve known each other since they were children, I’m sure he can put up with a “troubled child”.

“They’re cousins, huh?” Now that she’s said it, Shiyouko-san and Ariwara-san resemble each other quite a bit. Though I can’t explain how. After all, cousins only share 1/8 of the same genes, so it wouldn’t be likely that they would resemble each other. Yet there’s still an atmosphere that makes you say “oh” when you realize they’re cousins.

“Seriously… Isn’t it just a stupid séance?” Though that question will be left unanswered. The maid starts to call Ariwara-san, while Sakurako-san complains and sighs.
“I guess it can’t be helped. You’ll attend, too.”
“Huh?! You expect me to go?!”
“If you do, I’ll take you to Yoshimoto for sushi.”
“Uh… Oh, okay.”

Darn it! I got tempted by food again, and immediately regret nodding. On the other hand, I get

to go to Yoshimoto. It’s not an easy decision. Although Ariwara-san has only taken me once, Yoshimoto is in the downtown area of Asahikawa, it’s a well known sushi restaurant at the edge of the city.

On TV, they say the chef has God’s hands. All the customers were wearing suits, they seem to be politicians, or noted doctors. Even with just Ariwara-san and me (perhaps I should say it was mostly me), it costed 30 000 yen, enough to make you faint. This sushi, though, is enough to touch you on a deeply emotional level. This sushi is so good that some people travel just for it. It’s even included in famous international guidebooks. That’s why I can’t help but succumb to the temptation.

“Well then's decided.” Sakurako-san doesn’t, but Shiyouko-san hears my answer and smiled. I’m destroyed by food yet again. Ahhh, I really am an idiot.

Part three

I arrive at the séance, but it seems a few participants are running late. Ms. Shiyouko seems to misunderstand that I love sushi (more accurately, I love fish in general, not just sushi), as she prepared a lot of it for dinner.
“You’re still growing, right? I hear Osawa-san makes really delicious food for you. Please don’t hesitate to eat as much as you’d like.”

So with that, I start going for the sushi, even though it’s enough for 5 people. It’s not as good as Yoshimoto, but it’s still not sushi I could normally eat. The sushi rice falling apart is exquisite. The sea urchin is delicious enough to make me unintentionally let my voice out. Plump shore fish. The ezo abalone is firm, and fragrant.

"It's best when it's from Oma. The moderate amount of fat, quality, and taste of the lean fish is great." Ms. Shiyouko praises the fish with her mouth full of tuna, etc... Exactly one mouth full. Although I just ate gran’s Zangi a few hours ago, I already get to eat sushi. It seems Ms. Shiyouko has been having dinner alone lately, so I’m pleased that I could have dinner with her after for the first time in a while.

Besides her 2 maids, it seems Shiyouko-san lives alone in this huge mansion. Shiyouko-san says that she had fun talking to me today while drinking wine, as opposed to Sakurako-san, who isn’t good at talking to her.
“It seems the boy is eating plenty, so I’m relieved. I’m glad that some people have come to visit me today.” Apparently she’s not just trying to be polite. As I expected, it’s impossible to not indulge myself. “Please let me know if you need anything.” I say. I exchange email addresses with Shiyouko-san to show that I’m not just trying to be polite.

I wonder how a woman can support a house like this alone. I grew up with a single parent, so I already know a bit. I think I would be happy if I could just go home and sleep, and have a freshly baked cherry dessert. Unfortunately, this dinner party isn’t the only thing I have to attend,

there's also the séance. Since it's my first time participating in a "séance", I'm not exactly sure what to do.

I'm not very fond of occult things. When I was a child, my brother rented a horror movie called Poltergeist, so I couldn't eat fried chicken for a while (there is a terrible scene involving fried chicken in that movie). To be honest, I don't want to do this, but I feel like I can't back out after seeing Shiyouko-san's smiling face.

Soon after the evening, we pass by the salon that is surrounded by glass windows, overlooking the garden. The weather forecast has failed us. It was only raining a little bit when we ate dinner, so I open a window and get blown with cold wind.
"It's gotten all gloomy outside, huh?" I shiver while closing the window. It's just past the summer solstice, and it's been bright all day, so the fact that it's not bright anymore causes a vague anxiety to creeps up on me as I watch the half moon through the clouds.

"I wonder what you do during a séance…"
"Who cares?" Sakurako-san says bluntly.
"I don't believe in spirits in the first place."
"Really?"
"Obviously. Humans are the same machines, they run on electricity."
"Electricity, is it?" I feel like I hear that a lot.
"I'm not saying something as stupid as humans have cables. Muscles, heart, retina, stomach, brain – all kinds of internal organs emit weak currents. This is how you can get electrocardiograms and electroencephalograms. As long as the heart is moving, it emits a current of 100 millivolts. The heart is a particularly simple machine."

I thought she was talking about synapses, or something, so I'm a bit surprised by Sakurako-san's explanation. Thinking about the root words in "electrocardiogram", I'm convinced of what she's saying. When I was a child, the doctor stuck electrodes to my hands, and said that it was for an electrocardiogram, so I wonder why he didn't put them on my chest. I wonder if my hand was a conductor.

"I see, so it's electrical… But that just makes it sound like a machine."
"The difference is if it's made of metal, or if it's flesh. Individually, it's a simple mechanism, but as a whole, humans are very complicated. Good? It's electricity that moves a human, not a soul. So, this spiritualism is just nonsense." Saying so like it's bothersome, Sakurako-san takes a sip from her black tea that is starting to turn cold.

Sakurako-san denying the occult with such confidence causes my fear to loosen a bit. I take a deep breath and sip my tea. The tea was bought at an old store, which was the first tea specialty store in Hokkaido. The tea is from Life Lapsang seems to be from Nepal. It's very sweet and easy to drink, it even smells like chocolate.
"Even so, it's kind of awesome."

The participants start gathering in the salon. I was completely oblivious until everything was ready and I look over the salon while adding milk to my bitter tea. Sakurako-san snorts uninterestedly.

“This person is president Ohara, the owner of the popular theatre company, the Open Field Group. This is Mizuki-san, a member of the city council.”
“How detailed.”
“Sakurako-san just isn’t interested in the world around her.”

Nonetheless, my favourite celebrity belongs to that theatre company, which happens to be popular nationwide right now. It was mentioned a local news program yesterday evening, so the memory is still fresh. Although I explained to Sakurako-san with triumphant look, I’m not very well versed in the financial affairs of celebrities.

Mizuki-san, a city councillor who is attending today’s meeting, is a friendly visitor, as opposed to Shiyouko-san, who left during the preparations. Mizuki-san, who promotes the development of Asahikawa, uses the slogan “a city supports the citizens, a city is made by citizens”, and sometimes shows up in the town newspaper, travelling around by bicycle. I often see the election office on my way to school, and often see the bicycle leaving from the office. I thought he was a strange person, it seems that most people in citizen politics are like that.

In his wake, Asahikawa promoted the development of the cycle & bus ride parking facilities. In other words, it’s to set up bike racks near the bus stops for smooth commuting, called bicycle → bus, to increase the number of people using buses. He’s also into physical fitness, I hear he often goes mountain biking in the suburbs or outskirts of town, and he often has a sunburned face in interviews. Rather than seeming like an official, he has an energetic atmosphere, like a PE teacher.

Oh the other hand, president Ohara seems more suited for politics. President Ohara dressed in a suit gives off a high class feeling… he also has an eye-catching presence. Although he’s a former dairy farmer, he seems to have built up charisma through his career of being a president of a company.

Kohashi-san, who owns the theatre company Linus, works of screenplays, and does stage directing, is drinking tea a bit away from us. Although she’s the tallest among the attendees, she looks like she’s the smallest with her back curled up. When I saw her on stage before, she seemed very dignified, but now she seems strangely nervous and surprised, completely unlike how I imagined her. Mizuki-san lightly pats Kohashi-san’s back while picking up a sandwich, and says, “You don’t need to worry.” Maybe she’s more nervous than I am.

It seems that three people suddenly couldn’t come due to illness. Maybe they’re just too scared to come. Or, maybe I’m just thinking like that because I would’ve done the same thing. Or maybe a spiritual force interfered… I start to get increasingly more scared, so I try to stop thinking about these things.

There are three attendees today, they are Mizuki-san, president Ohara, and a flashy looking woman (I don't really know who, but I think she's the wife of someone famous. Even after hearing her name, I don't know who she is) with us and Ms. Shiyouko, there's 7 of us.

Among these people, I feel a bit out of place, and Sakurako-san is pouting… After thinking for a while, a tall man in a black hood that looks like a medium calmly enters the room. Mizuki-san stands up, greeting him like an acquaintance. The medium speaks. His words have a strange intonation. Looking closer, it seems he's a foreigner. It seems the intonation is a habit, even though he's fluent in Japanese, I get an uncomfortable feeling. I wonder why, his spine is stretched straight, and he has good posture. Apparently I have an image that mediums should have a more curled up posture, like Kohashi-san.

It's time to start, so the lights in the salon are turned off, and many candles are lit. Although it's surprisingly bright, the orange light casts countless dark shadows across the room. I have to hide my fear.
"Now, let's begin" Shiyouko-san says, so we all get in a circle around the table. The medium, a young man, is standing at the head of the table, looking at us. Shiyouko-san and Mizuki-san sit on opposite sides of the table, so we follow.

"Today, we're meeting to call Mizuki's late wife." The medium speaks in a solemn murmur.
"Oh, not just Mizuki-san, also Chiyoda-san..."

I whisper in Sakurako-san's ear; "Who is Chiyoda-san?"
"Chiyoda Akihito – Shiyouko-san's husband. He died in an accident half a year ago."
"What…?"

Hearing that he died surprises me. Shiyouko-san was talking about her husband like he was still alive when we were talking in front of the sculpture in the entrance. Of course I just thought her husband worked somewhere far away, or was too busy to come home often, like Ohara-san.

"It seems he got drunk and slipped on some stairs. It's a pitiful event, but that's what happens to people that like alcohol too much." Sakurako-san narrows her eyes while she whispers to me. I really want to call her husband, but I'm also convinced it'll be painful. At least in Shiyouko-san's heart her husband is still alive.

"Even so… Will a spirit really appear?" Kohashi-san says in a half-doubting tone of voice. Her doubtful tone also sounds somewhat angry. Mizuki-san's eyebrows furrow. The medium smiles and says, "Of course. They are already coming to our side."
"Huh?" Everyone except Sakurako-san lets out a surprised voice. Of course, I am no exception.

"You don't believe me?"
"Oh… I'm sorry." Shiyouko-san answers meekly, I feel sorry for her.
"Now, the spirit will prank you a bit."
"Prank...?"

As if she's in danger, Shiyouko-san tilts her head and replies in a slightly nervous voice.
"The spirit will now touch your body – don't worry, it's a female spirit." The medium says gently, but Mizuki-san laughs. However, Shiyouko-san becomes stiff, and doesn't smile.

"No… I'm scared."
"It's okay, there's nothing scary, it's just a slightly strange feeling."
"A strange feeling?"
"Could you lend me a hand? The spirit will enter your body through mine."
"Something like that… Will it be okay?"
"It's temporary, so you don't need to worry. Once the spirit enters, your hands will feel hot for a while."
"It'll feel hot?"
"Although a spirit with strong anger and sadness is cold, a good spirit is like warm sunshine."

The spirit medium holds out a hand, but Shiyouko-san looks at us first. After all, a spirit isn't something you can normally touch. Since I'm a bit worried, everyone but Sakurako-san and I close their eyes as Shiyouko-san turns her gaze toward us. Shiyouko-san herself doesn't look very delighted.

She looks like she's asking for help, it makes me feel restless. As if she thinks something terrible is going to happen, she stands up and shakes her head. She exhales, prepares herself, and takes the medium's hand. I wonder if she feels like this is her responsibility as the host of the event. She doesn't seem very determined, and she almost seems angry. Perhaps it's due to the mention of her late husband.

The medium squeezes Shiyouko-san's hand while murmuring some kind of spell. "Please relax, I will draw out your power" he says. Ms. Shiyouko obediently follows the instructions, taking a deep breath and trying to smile.
"How are you?" The medium asks.
"Well… I don't understand."
"You will gradually get warmer, little by little." The medium says, while gently stroking Shiyouko-san's hand.

She stares at my face, then says "Ah…" quietly.
"Have you gotten warmer?"
"Yes, my skin has really gotten hot. I don't like this, I'm scared…"
"Please don't be afraid. Warmth means it's a harmless spirit. Please be relieved. If you feel scared or give off a bad impression, the spirit will hurt you."
"I see… spirits are just like humans, then."
"Yes, exactly the same. Actually, a soul that has been freed from its body is more emotional than living beings." The medium says, as he reaches out to touch Shiyouko-san's forehead.

"It seems that the spirit has completely entered your body."
"It has?"
"Yes. You may not have noticed, but the spirit is now controlling your body."

“Huh?”
“Please stand up.”
“Stand?”
“Yes, please get up from the chair.”
“…” Shiyouko-san tries to stand up, but she makes a puzzled a expression.
“Huh…” Suddenly, she lets out a small scream.
“How are you?”
“This is strange. Why can’t I stand up…?” I don’t think she’s acting, her face is genuinely turning pale while she groans.

“This is the spirit’s prank.”
“No way… Just by holding her arm… This isn’t normal, right?” Kohashi-san mutters in amazement, while containing her laughter.
“I’m not holding her down, I’m just touching her with my fingertips.” The medium answers. “I’m only holding down the spirit. You can touch the spirit with just your fingertips – hey, you still can’t move?”
“Oh, yes…”

The medium doesn’t seem to be putting any strength into his hands, and he is only touching her forehead with his index and middle fingers. I don’t know if he actually is putting strength into it, though.
“Okay, you should be able to stand up.” The medium says in a gentle tone. He mutters another spell, then takes his hand off Shiyouko-san ‘s forehead. Shiyouko-san timidly looks over at us as the medium urges her to try standing up again.
“Ah… I can really stand up now.”

Mizuki-san suddenly starts clapping as Shiyouko-san stands up. I’m confused and relieved, so I obediently clap, too. Apart from Sakurako-san, everyone is clapping disjointedly. Once the clapping calms down, the medium lets out a satisfied sigh.

“However, the spirit is still inside you. Now, the spirit says it will play a prank on your hands.”
“My hands?”
“Yes, your hands.” The medium grabs Shiyouko-san’s elbow.
“The spirit’s power being extracted should now cause your fingertips to move, regardless of if you want them to.”
“My fingers?”

Shiyouko-san looks a bit relieved for the second time as she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. As the power seems to leave her, her fingers bend slightly. Eventually, her fingers slowly, slowly start to move.
“Are they being moved by the spirit?”
“Yes…” Shiyouko-san says in an amazed voice.
“Are you sure you’re not the one moving them?”
She nods, and says, “yes…”

“The power has been drawn out… It’s strange…” As soon as her fingers stop moving, the medium releases his hand and mutters some kind of spell.

Now, the medium stands behind Ms. Shiyouko, and lightly hits her back while chanting a spell. “With this, the spirit is gone.” Shiyouko-san puts her hand to her chest and takes a deep breath with relief.
“…But there’s a chance that Ms. Chiyoda is an accomplice, isn’t there?” Because of Kohashi-san’s harsh words, the medium says, “well then, you can test it, too” before performing a series of pranks on Kohashi-san. Kohashi-san seems to be toyed around with by the spirit, and tells us about her experience with extreme tension – perhaps due to the excessive adrenaline, fear, and surprise. Where did that nervous figure from earlier go? Apparently she completely believes in the spirit now.

Since I was scared in the first place, I don’t want to believe it’s real, but maybe I just want to deny it. Looking at Kohashi-san, I start to feel scared. Only Sakurako-san is making a bored expression while looking away.

Part 4

“You seem to be quite compatible with the spirit. Let’s try communicating with a Ouija board. It will be easier to understand that way.” After the ceremony with the pranks, the medium takes out some kind of game board with the alphabet written on it.
“Ouija board?”
“It’s like we have in Japan, childlike things like Kokkuri-san.” Sakurako-san whispers in my ear.

“But what the spirit did earlier seemed real.”
“Real? You really are slow.”
“Then… you think there was a trick?”
“It’s obvious. Even if it was a request from Ms. Shiyouko, I can’t go along with this farce. It’s pointless.”
“Is there a reason to not go along with it? Just wait a little bit longer.”
“Isn’t this woman the chairman of a theatre group? Is there any reason to not say that she’s acting?”
“Then do you think Shiyouko-san is an accomplice? Earlier she really-“
“You really do say stupid things. That’s the natural reaction based on scientific grounds.”

“Please be quiet.” The medium says to us in a sharp voice. “If you make too much noise, the spirit will leave.”
“The spirit will?”
“Yes, the soul is already falling out of this person’s body.”
“I can feel it. Yes! There's a strange, warm feeling inside my body.” Kohashi-san responds with overactive excitement, as if she’s on stage, causing Sakurako-san to start laughing. The medium lets out a small sigh.

"Indeed, this is terrible."

"….Rest assured, you're not the only one to say that. There are lots of pitiful people who believe that those sorts of things are the only things to see in this world."
"I'm a pitiful person?"
"Yes, you're a pathetic person who can only see things from a scientific point of view."
"…" Sakurako-san glares angrily at the medium, before suddenly laughing.
"Did you know? If there's a shortage of serotonin in the human brain, it's hard to control emotions. However, my serotonin secretions aren't bad. That's why I won't believe in your tea ceremony here. I'd like it if you'd continue. I'd like to see more of your comical figure." Sakurako-san says calmly, while Shiyouko sits back down.

For a moment, the medium's expression stiffens, but he soon nods and makes a face like he pities Sakurako-san. Her gestures and expressions are starting to show irritation. Perhaps Sakurako-san is starting to get angry.

Even with the strained atmosphere, the séance was resumed, though I'm somewhat uncomfortable being between the medium and Sakurako-san. Like Sakurako-san said earlier, the Ouija board is similar to Kokkuri, as the spirit moves something around on an alphabet. On the wooden board there's a moon and a sun facing left and right, and a number of stars and devils around the edges. It seems the spirit slides a small plate with a hole in the centre (which seems to be a planchette) on the board. The board has the alphabet with numbers, yes and no, and hello and goodbye on it.

"Let's get started." The medium says as he puts his hands on the planchette. Kohashi-san imitates him. The medium chants in an unfamiliar language.

"… Are you Taeko Mizuki-san?" Eventually, a sound like rubbing wood was made, as the planchette gave an answer from beneath their hands.
<No.> (TL NOTE: I'll put chevrons around things the ouija board says.)
"No?" With that answer, the medium speaks up.
"This is strange… Apparently another spirit has entered while we were talking."
"A different spirit?"
"Let me ask for it's name again. What is your name?"

Scratch, scratch, scratch, the planchette slides along the board, showing one letter at a time.
<A-K-I-H-I-T-O>
<Akihito.>
"Akihito-san…?" After a momentary silence, Shiyouko-san mutters in a shaky voice. "That's in bad taste! He's dead!"

The Ohara president stands up upon hearing her sharp voice. Shiyouko-san anxiously says, "I don't care if this is a joke, it's going to far." Kohashi-san and Mizuki-san glare at the medium.
"…Are you really Akihito-san?" The medium asks with a trembling voice, while Shiyouko-san shivers and stares at the board.

<Yes.> The planchette answers.

“Something… That’s right, how about you try asking something? For example, something only you know.” The medium says.
“That’s an unreasonable thing to ask of Chiyoda-san. Stop.” President Ohara says in an angry voice. I agree. Although he's in a dictatorial position, his broadcast yesterday didn't seem like it was lying when it made him out to be a good person.

Shiyouko-san shakes her head at the president, and covers her face with her hands.
“… The moles.” She lets out in a muffled voice through her fingers.
“Moles?”
“My husband – he had strange moles.” Ms. Shiyouko faces the board to ask a question. Again, the scratching sound echoes as the letters are dictated.

<Triangle.>
“… Triangle?” I accidentally repeat. Everyone looks at me, as Ms. Shiyouko smiles and looks like she’ll cry at any moment.
“… Akihito-san had three moles in a triangle on his butt… Only I would know that. It’s him.”
“No way…”

Shiyouko-san lets out a small laugh.
“I’ve always…. Wanted to meet with you, and talk to you, Akihito-sa-“
“Stop it! This is desecration of the dead!” President Ohara suddenly shouts. At that moment, I hear a big crash as the glass from one of the salon windows falls.

“…” Everyone immediately falls silent. The fresh air that flows into the room is heated by the candle flame, but the salon still becomes cold.
“Please don’t shout, the spirit is angry.” The medium says in a low voice.
“The spirit can get angry?”
“Yes. It seems that it wants to convey something important to us.”
“Something important?”
“Yes, that’s right. Let’s ask.”
“I want to ask, too.”

As the medium speaks, Shiyouko-san nods. Kohashi-san looks troubled as she adds her hand to the Ouija board, and the planchette begins to move as smoothly as ever.

<M-U-R-D-E-R>
<Murder.>
“… Murder? As in… killed?” Mizuki-san and I say simultaneously.
“Were you killed by someone?”
<Yes.>
“No way…”
“Ridiculous!” Bam! Ohara-san hits the table.
“But if that’s true, this is just terrible…” Kohashi-san says with a dumbfounded look.
“Shiyouko-san’s husband was… murdered?”
“Hey, boy. What are you talking about?”

I murmur, and Sakurako-san lets out a surprised voice. It seems Sakurako-san wasn't paying attention to the séance. I think that's a lie, though.

"But Chiyoda-san died in an accident, didn't he?" The woman asks Shiyouko-san.
"Yes… He got drunk and slipped on some stairs… Due to his job at the time, he had his own apartment. I guess he was drinking after work. It was a maisonette type… He slipped on those stairs and died."
<No.>

Kohashi-san is looking at Ms. Shiyouko. And yet, the planchette makes a screeching sound while it moves.
"What is this?! All on it's own! The screeching! It won't end!"
"No way…"

The planchette repeatedly moves back and forth over "No", as if denying Shiyouko-san's words. Kohashi-san, who is being driven mad by the sound, yells at the medium for help. The medium lets out a short breath, and makes a troubled face.
"This spirit… Is it really Akihito…?" Mizuki-san lets out a dumbfounded mutter as he watches the planchette.

"Dang it!" Ohara-san's voice echoes in the salon. Besides Sakurako-san, he's the only person in the salon who denies the existence of the spirit.
"You were killed, weren't you? Well then – was it an acquaintance?" The medium asks in a shaky voice.
<Yes.>
"Was it a man? Or a woman?"
<Man.>
"Do you hate the person?"
<Yes.>

It's rapid movements over the letters speed up a bit. The planchette begins to move violently, showing "Yes, Yes" over and over again.
"S- st- stop please! My arm will tear off!" Kohashi-san starts screaming, her arm shaking violently.

"Do you want revenge?"
<Yes, yes, yes.>
"Are you trying to curse him?"
<Yes, yes, yes.>
"The spirit's hatred it rising. This is dangerous." The medium holds down a panicked Kohashi-san's arm. Even so, the planchette doesn't stop. The medium holds down two people's arms.

"L- let's make this the last question! At this rate, Kohashi-san and everyone else is in danger!"

“Hurry! Please do something!!” Kohashi-san shouts, and the medium gives a deep nod.
“Is the person who killed you among us?”
<Yes.>
For a moment, the planchette stops. It’s abrupt, as if it wants to say something.
“… Huh?” It becomes silent just as abruptly, nobody can open their mouth.
“What is this?” Mizuki-san groans in a low voice.
“Yes? … The person who killed Akihito is inside this room…?”

Shiyouko-san mutters dumfoundedly, as if a high class lady couldn’t bear the thought, she screams just like the planchette.
“I… I will be leaving now.”
“Wait! Are you trying to escape?!
“What do you mean?! Do you really think I would do something like that to Chiyoda-san? It’s creepy!”
“But the culprit is here!”
“You doubt me?! Stop it! You’re all idiots!” Shiyouko-san pushes the chairs out of the way and jumps out of the salon.
“Please wait- ah.” Shiyouko-san pushes past everyone without stopping.

As I try to stop her, she suddenly kneels on the floor.
“It’s okay, it’s not her. Her husband says he was killed by a man.” Even so, the medium is holding Shiyouko-san back by her shoulder.
“Well then…. A man…?”
“…” Silence rules over the salon.

Shiyouko-san is trembling, Kohashi-san looks very tired, Mizuki-san looks serious, Mr.Ohara looks angry and scared, and Sakurako-san looks as bored as ever – all 6 of us are staring at each other. Ohara is the first one to move.
“…Well, I will be leaving, too.”
“…Ohara-san, you’re a man.”
“Do you really think the culprit is in this room?”
“I don’t know, I don’t know, but….”
“No, I understand.” Sakurako-san says sharply to break up the dispute between Shiyouko-san and Ohara-san.

“Saachan… but…”
“Spiritual powers and such are just lies.”
“It’s not a lie! I’m sure I was being controlled by a spirit! You should’ve seen me! The medium wasn’t touching me. Someone invisible is surely moving this planchette-“ When Kohashi-san tries to deny her, Sakurako-san immediately says “No, spiritual powers don’t exist in this world.”
“Miss, what kind of basis do you have for-“ Mizuki-san’s face distorts into anger as Sakurako-san says, “this is my evidence.”
“This is the first trick. In order for a person to stand up, they must first move their centre of gravity forward. Therefore, if something is blocking your head, you can’t shift your centre of gravity, and can’t stand up. A strong force isn’t necessary. Unless the person is intentionally

trying to move their head forward, it's enough. Since she moved her head aside, she could stand up normally."
"Centre of gravity…?"

Now that she mentions it, I try to get up from my chair. I naturally shift my weight to my legs. In other words, I have to shift my weight from my waist to my legs. At the same time, my head has to move as well. I try to consciously not move my head, but I can't stand up.
"… It's true, I can't stand up without moving my centre of gravity forward."
"You arms move automatically, it's a natural response. The medium held her elbow. She probably felt a hot sensation in her elbow."
"Now that you mention it…" Ms. Shiyouko's brow wrinkles.
"He probably used the peripheral nerves. When stimulus is applied to the elbow, the current is transmitted to the fingers, making them move. This medium is horrible. He could use a small generator, like the ones used in gambling and magic. With a large pocket, it would be easy to put it in."
"A generator used for gambling?"
"Ah, sometimes trickery is used in gambling. By adding magnets to the table and dice, you can manipulate the outcome. When a current passes, the magnet will draw that face down. You had better be careful betting money at a cheap bar. Even though it's summer, it's not unnatural to be wearing bulky black gloves. I'd guess the gloves he's wearing have a weak current from the generator. If I'm wrong, take your gloves off."
"Then..." Ms. Shiyouko mutters, relieved.

"That's right. This is not the work of a spirit. Actually, nothing that happened was that strange."
"But how do you explain her arm getting hot?!"
"There's this convenient thing, though Shiyouko-san doesn't seem to know about it, called hand warmers. When the house is cold in the winter, I'm sometimes troubled with dull finger movements while preparing specimens. Of course, winter is still my favourite season. I use chilli peppers to warm up my hands, though it hurts a bit."
"…"
"Even with the window broken, this room is still dim. Someone could have throw a stone or something at it. During that time, everyone was paying attention to Ohara. Even if someone did do something, it wouldn't be impossible for us to not notice."
"The spirit isn't a lie!" The medium says, but it resounds in vain.
"That's right! Well, I guess if the spirit is fake, that means you're fake, too, doesn't it?"

The medium glares at Sakurako-san, but she doesn't say anything. Ohara-san stands up and yells, "Idiot! Go home!"
"This isn't over yet!" The medium stands in front of Ohara-san.
"This is idiotic!"

Ohara-san leaves the room and walks away. Before he can prove the spirits' existence, the medium is just staring at Ohara-san's back. Once president Ohara disappears, the medium sits on the floor in protest.

"... This is a ridiculous party." Sakurako-san mutters.
“You don’t know anything.” Mizuki-san says while glaring at Sakurako-san. His expression has a certain anger in it.
“Know nothing? I’m aware of that. I do know that this is an absurd story. Isn’t that right, pretending priest?” Sakurako-san says while grinning at the medium.
“Priest?” Shiyouko-san and I ask at the same time.
“Why would you, a servant of God, perform this farce? Well, it priests used to perform rituals, so perhaps spiritualism is actually correct for you to do.” Sakurako-san tells us in her usual disagreeable tone. Every time she speaks, it confuses people. She suddenly said something strange, but the medium doesn’t seem to be denying it.

“…Why do you know that?”
“Your neck.”
“Neck?”
“Your face is tanned, but your throat is white. Only priests and high school students wear something with a collar that tall – well, seeing how you’re shaking, I’m probably correct.” The medium hangs his head in shame.
“No way, was everything… really a lie?” Shiyouko-san stands up with anger in her voice.
“Why would you do that?! It’s terrible!”
“I didn’t want to hurt you! We had something to do!”
“Did you really need to do this?!”
“…I can’t tell you the details. However, it’s related to Chiyoda-san.”
“Chiyoda – you mean her husband?”

To Shiyouko-san’s question, the medium - no, the priest, takes a deep breath.
“He didn’t die in an accident, he really was murdered.”
“How do you know that?” Sakurako-san asks sharply.
“I can’t tell you that.”
“I don’t understand, please tell me.”
“I can’t hurt Ms. Chiyoda anymore. Besides, I have decided not to lie anymore.”
“How did you hurt me?”
“…” The priest doesn’t answer Shiyouko-san’s question.
“Anyway, Chiyoda-san was murdered. The one who murdered him is the other Ohara president.”
“What is your evidence?”
“I saw it.”
“Saw it?”
“I saw Chiyoda-san get killed right before my eyes.”
“What do you mean?”

Seeing Shiyouko-san’s body stiffen makes me tense up mine, too. Another cold gust of wind blows in from outside, giving me a creeping feeling on my skin.

Part 5

“If my husband was really killed, please tell me about it. If that’s the truth, I think I have the right to know. No, I think I need to know.” Shiyouko-san says while leaning closer to the priest.
“Tell me whatever you can. Let’s hear it.”
“…I can’t tell you anything.” The priest looks down and shakes his head.
“Why?!”
“I can’t tell you that.”
Shiyouko-san clenches her fist over her chest and murmurs, “why…” again in a hoarse voice. She sounds like she could start crying at any moment. However, the priest is still stubborn.

“Please wait. If Ohara-san is really the criminal, if you’re a criminal… umm…”
“Hiding a criminal and destroying evidence of a crime.”
“Oh, that’s right, you should be charged with hiding a criminal and destroying the evidence. That’s also a significant crime.” She stands up without any self control, full of things to say, thanks to Sakurako-san’s bit of help.

The crime of hiding a criminal and destroying evidence, in short, knowing who the criminal is, while hiding them and destroying the evidence they left behind.
“How could a churchman help with something like that?!”
“What I did wasn’t to protect the criminal!” The priest objects loudly.
“If that’s the case, why didn’t you tell anyone?! You should have told the police!”
“If I could’ve done that, I wouldn’t have had a problem with it.”
To my surprise, it wasn’t the priest who said that, it was Mizuki-san.

“Huh…?”
“Since we couldn’t do that, we’re in trouble now.”
“What do you mean by ‘we’? What does that-“ After quickly glancing at me, the priest takes a deep breath.
“…Do you really regret it?”
“Yes, but even if you regret it, I still blame you.”
“I’m not afraid of being blamed. However… I don’t want to trouble you…”

The priest, who didn’t want to talk earlier during his dispute with Ms. Shiyouko, he lifts his face and sits in Ohara’s not vacant seat.
“Once you hear it, you’ll think we’re beyond redemption. Is it still okay?”
“But as it is now, I will only suffer more.”
“Please understand, I wasn’t trying to deceive you, I was silently thinking about the best for you.” While saying this, the medium – no, the priest, takes off his hood that he’s been wearing all this time. Somehow, he gives off an atmosphere of a faithful servant to God. However, as Sakurako-san said, he’s a priest and an imposter.

“… Where should I start from?”
“My husband should have died at the mansion, were you there?”
“… No, that’s wrong.” As if to prepare himself, the priest breathes deeply.
“But there’s a video.”
“Video?”

“There is a video recording of the murder scene.”
“Why didn’t you say that before?!” I accidentally raise my voice.
“It’s not necessarily true that it’s always best to announce it.”
“Are you trying to protect the person who killed your husband?”
“No, that’s not the reason. However, this video should not be publicly announced.”
“… I’m sorry, but I don’t understand…?”

I hold my head to try to endure my headache as Shiyouko-san speaks.
“Father York…”
Mizuki-san and Kohashi-san sigh, while Mizuki-san anxiously taps the priest’s shoulder.
“Anything helps, so could you please tell me everything? I don’t think it’s possible to convince us like this.”
“But I don’t think it’s a story you want to hear.” Instead of the priest, Mizuki-san answers.
“Why?”
“Akihito-san wouldn’t want this. You hiding this forever.”
“That’s right. This is for Akihito-san.” The priest squeezes out his voice bitterly.
“I see, beneath the rose.” Suddenly, Sakurako-san mutters, when whistles. “Now I can connect the dots. In short, this was an unsightly revenge.”
“Sakurako-san?”

“Priest, what did you tell Mr. Mizuki and Mr. Kohashi? You’re all accomplices. Why else would the subject of revenge during tonight’s farce be a man?”
“No, I did it to turn myself in.” The priest strongly denies.
“Is that so?”
“I’m not after revenge!”
“Isn’t that enough?” Suddenly, Kohashi-san speaks up, after being silent until now. That low voice, as if spoken on stage, echoes through the salon, causing everyone to fall silent. “How about we tell them? She probably doesn’t want to, but… I feel like Shiyouko-san has the right to hear everything.”

With everyone’s gaze falling on the scene, she drops her gaze again, while Mizuki-san and the priest look at each other. I notice that Kohashi-san is just a quiet person, using a method like this. She is probably the kind of person who dramatically changes their personality on stage.

“Even if it’s not by the script, you still have to close the curtain at some point. This two person ad lib is quite poor. We won’t be able to convince you just by saying that we can’t talk about it right now. Just tell them everything… We’ll discuss it from there.” Kohashi-san’s voice is clear, even though it’s quiet.

Mizuki-san and the priest quietly look at each other, and decide to give up. The priest starts to speak.
“The first time I met Akihito-san was when he was asking for forgiveness for his sins in the confession room. He seemed to have been a little drunk. Being drunk, he probably just wanted someone to listen to his story. He confided in me about the troubles he’d been having for many years.”

“Confession room?”
Mizuki-san covers his face with his hands.
“After that, he started to occasionally visit the church, and we gradually became acquainted. I even went to visit his store and house sometimes. Because of my credentials as a priest, he came to confide in my with his secrets – one of which was a hidden camera.”
“Camera…”
“That’s right. When guests visited his house… they had photos taken of them in secret…. So he asked my to secretly dispose of the pictures when I was there.”
“Why would my husband do something like that?”
“Hey, Shiyouko-san. The husband you know and this person are a little different.” Mizuki-san says.
“This is the myth of Harpocrates, the god of silence.” Sakurako-san suddenly says.
“Harpo-“

“In Greek myths, the goddess of love and beauty was the wife of the god of blacksmithing, but she became absorbed in secrecy with the god of war. Her son, Eros, gave a rose to Harpocrates, the god of silence, as a thank you for keeping his mother’s affairs a secret. Since then, roses have meant ‘secrecy’.”
While listening to Sakurako-san speak, Shiyouko-san tilts her head to the side.
“So, there’s a pledge from the olden days in Rome that any secret spoken under a rose bush shouldn’t be revealed to others. So, how does that relate to your husband?”
“That house was under a rose bush for him.” Ms. Shiyouko suddenly raises her head as she speaks.
“Are you saying that Akihito-san had another woman?”
“No, probably not a woman.”
“…”
The priest and Mizuki-san hang their heads in silence.

“If there’s a picture of the murder scene, it would be best to bring it to the police. However, they would hesitate, say the séance is foolish, or try to make the criminal turn himself in. At first, I didn’t know the reason.” A laugh rises from Sakurako-san’s throat. “The husband was distinguished and had influence in financial affairs, and had a good relationship with the priest. Because of his authority, the priest probably wasn’t his only lover, he had many, I would guess. Moreover, he secretly recorded everything in his house – a very scandalous topic.”
Rather than answer, the priest just hangs his head.

“Good relationship…? Lover…? The priest?”
“I guess you don’t want to expose your stomach. Since you’re cooperating, you must understand each other’s habits. No, perhaps you’re reflecting them.”
They don’t deny it, Ms. Shiyouko seems to understand and says “My…” as her face turns red and she covers her mouth with her hand.
“Anyway, you wanted to report Ohara to the police using the video. After submitting it, you will be asked questions about it, if it’s edited, there will be traces. There’s a potentially high chance of the police being suspicious, so you don’t want to use the video, but you haven’t found any

other evidence. So, you decided to let Akihito's ghost during this occasion, and make him confess for you."
"… That's right. If you hadn't said anything, it would've gone smoothly." Mizuki-san scowls at Sakurako-san.
"That's in hindsight."
"No! If you hadn't done anything, we could have taken him to the police!"
"Please wait!" Mizuki-san raises his voice, and stares unhappily at Sakurako-san. Shiyouko-san speaks in a controlled voice.
"My husband… Liked men?"
"…"
Nobody can respond, but eventually, the priest deeply, deeply lowers his head to Shiyouko-san.

"I… shouldn't appear before you like this. Really… I am so sorry. But still, Ohara-"
"… I thought he hated me."
"Huh?"
Without looking at the apologizing priest, she looks out the window.
"We met through a marriage interview. I know that I can't have children, that's why I felt like my husband didn't love me. I never liked myself because of that." Shiyouko-san slowly stands up, grabbing the window with the cracked glass with one hand.
"I thought he cared about and cherished me. There were lots of hardships, but every day was calm, and we didn't fight. But still… I had a feeling somewhere in my heart that my husband didn't like me."
"That's not right." Mizuki-san denies with a very clear tone. "Chiyoda-san was a man who couldn't love a woman. Nevertheless, you're the only woman in the whole world who can be called his wife. He could have divorced you if he wanted to. Chiyoda-san certainly loved you, and the roses you grow."
"So…"

The fragments of glass shine brightly in the candle light. For a moment, they look like Shiyouko-san's tears.
"…Thought it's a little different from what you wanted, he felt guilty, and he didn't want to lose you. Please trust me. The one woman he needed in his life was you."
"If that's true… It makes me a little happy."
"It is true! That's why… Even though he cheated on his wife, and we might not be very good at convincing you, this…" Kohashi-san adds, while Shiyouko-san slowly nods and puts her head down. The light from the salon is shining on the dark garden late at night.

"…My husband and I, just the two of us, I loved talking on rainy afternoons during our days off, decorating with roses and drinking tea. It's because we couldn't play golf on rainy days. I used to hate rainy days, but since I married Akihito-san, I always felt happy when it was raining on days off." Shiyouko-san is still holding the glass. She is playing with the glass in her fingers uncertainly, as Sakurako-san walks over to her and holds her hands.

"I'm happy that I could spend today with you, really-" Shiyouko-san mutters, drops the glass, and buries her face into Sakurako-san's shoulder.

“He was forced to endure that time with me, even though I couldn’t make him happy. I’ll always regret that. He was tormented by regret every day… If it wasn’t like this, he could have been happy.”
“It’s unfortunate that it had to be that way. Chiyoda-san was happy to marry you. He was certainly suffering enough to ask for help from God, but that’s because he wanted to love you. He wanted you to be happy. Do you think he’d want that if he hated you?” Mizuki-san says forcefully.
“That’s really good…” Ms. Shiyouko’s voice is quiet as tears start rolling down her cheeks.

Part 6

We turn on the lights, blow out the candle, and clean up the broken glass. The magic is gone, and the salon becomes a part of the everyday world again.
“So why was he killed? It doesn’t seem to have been a grudge.” Sakurako-san asks the priest, who still has his head down.
“I don’t know. But… Ohara and Chiyoda-san once said that they were good friends.”
“Ohara-san sponsored our marriage.” Shiyouko-san says quickly, as the priest drops his gaze to his feet.
“Since there isn’t any sound, I don’t know what they spoke about. In the beginning, it seems they were talking to each other kindly, but soon it changed to a quarrel – after the dispute, they got closer to each other… and Chiyoda-san fell down the stairs.”
“…”
“Chiyoda-san had recently hurt his knee, so he couldn’t protect himself from slipping on the stairs… Ohara-san escaped the room, rather than helping Akihito-san. Akihito-san didn’t die immediately, he suffered. After a while, he stopped moving.” Anger and tears cause the priest’s voice to tremble. He regrets not being able to do anything about the death of a loved one. Tears flow down Shiyouko-san’s cheeks as she listens.

“If Ohara-san had immediately called an ambulance, Akihito-san might not have died! That person… That person murdered Akihito-san!” As soon as she shouts, the priest breaks down crying, unable to bear it. Mizuki-san gently puts his hand on the priest’s shoulder and says “let me explain from here.” He leans in the table, and puts on hand in his inner canthus, while taking a single deep breath.
“Tell me something. Besides the priest, why are you participating in this foolish farce?” Sakurako-san asks Mizuki-san and Kohashi-san, Mizuki-san just laughs unpleasantly.
“Yes, it may be foolish, but… we didn’t think there was another After his self-deprecating laughter dies down, Mizuki-san lightly hits his thigh, and begins to speak as if he’s prepared himself.

“The store Chiyoda-san invested in became famous – I was a regular customer there. I wasn’t close to Chiyoda-san, but of course we were acquainted, and sometimes we’d have alcohol together. I liked Chiyoda-san’s personality. A few days after his funeral, I visited Father York. I knew he was very close to Chiyoda-san, so I thought he’d be the only person I could share my sorrow with.” Mizuki-san takes a handkerchief out of his pocket and gives it to the priest.

However, the priest doesn't take it, so Mizuki-san wipes his forehead with a bitter face before putting it back in his pocket.

"…So, I heard about the existence of the video from the priest. I can't explain the details, but… it seems to have some inconvenient content inside. He used that apartment while he was away for work. The video doesn't have colour. Chiyoda-san was a good person, and he was also a great manager. The world just didn't turn the right way for him."
"That's right. Weren't you the one who proposed the idea of hiding the video?" Sakurako-san asks. Mizuki-san slowly shakes his head with a bitter smile.
"No, of course it's not easy to say, but that was Father York. Still, he told me the truth, and wanted Ohara-san to take sincere action at all costs - I couldn't refuse." Mizuki-san sighs deeply before closing his eyes. He seems to be starting to cry. He sighs one more time before reopening his eyes, and talking with no expression on his face.

"This isn't an easy thing. It's because that video exists in this world in the first place. That's why we racked our brains. Before long, we realized that we were inadequate, so we decided to have Kohashi-san become an accomplice. She has very good acting skills, and she's the one who thought of the plan to dress up as a medium." As soon as his name is said, Kohashi-san opens her eyes, surprised. After a bit of hesitation, she says, "that's right", and bows to Ms. Shiyouko.
"... Chiyoda-san has been helping me out since I was young. Until his death, he always sponsored my theatre. Chiyoda-san helped out my troupe's younger members, and helped them stand out."
"I know. Kohashi-san, everytime my husband saw your theatre troupe name, he was very happy…" Shiyouko-san replies. But in my mind, only the priest's confessing echoes.
Shiyouko-san bites her lip and gazes downward.

"Umm… Did Ohara-san really push him?"
The priest glares at me ask if he's just noticing that I'm here as I ask my question. Kohashi-san and Mizuki-san look at me, then glance at each other. Eventually, Mizuki-san opens his mouth with an unpleasant face.
"The three of us saw the scene of Chiyoda-san repeat and repeat, many, many times." After speaking, Mizuki-san covers his face with his hands. Many, many times – the way he speaks causes the deep sorrow to spread like liquid.

"He entered the camera's blind spot, so I don't really know if Ohara actually pushed him. Chiyoda-san fell, it seems that he fainted. When he saw it, Ohara thought he had died. In a hurry to escape, he ran away from the room." They look at me. Even with an answer, it's unlikely to reverse the pain of seeing someone you like die over and over, many times. Was it a sense of justice that moved them? I wonder if it was passion, or in the name of revenge.

"However, Choyoda-san wasn't dead. If that man hadn't run, and had called the ambulance… he may have been saved." The priest's throat quivers. Kohashi-san says nothing, she just closes her mouth tightly, and nods repeatedly.
"… You're right."
However, Shiyouko-san is in denial.

“What?”
“That… isn’t that just in hindsight?”
“Wha…” Three people hear her incredible words, eyes wide open, looking at Shiyouko-san with challenge.
“Of course, if he had dealt with it properly, your husband may not have died. However, it’s all assumption until the end. There is the possibility that the husband slipped on the stairs himself, and there is the possibility that he couldn’t be saved by an ambulance. Am I right?”
“… What are you taking about?” Shiyouko-san calmly looks as them, and exhales deeply.

“At least, Ohara-san didn’t have murderous intent, right?”
“I don’t understand…”
“That video has something he wants to hide, something that shouldn’t come to light. So, you guys thought you couldn’t report it in a normal way.”
“Yes, that’s right. However, after this, I’m going to the police.” Hearing the priest’s powerful voice, Mizuki-san lifts his head.
“But… Father York… you’ll get in trouble.”
“You’re saying I can’t be forgiven.”
“Forgive – who said that? God? Or another priest? That person… Would her husband really want you arrested?”
“Huh?”
“What he would want?” You can hear the smirk in Sakurako-san’s voice.
“You! Don’t talk about what you don’t understand!” Mizuki-san’s face turns red with anger.
“I know already. At least, more than you. The deceased don’t desire anything. I can’t tell you whether to take revenge or not. He isn’t even a corpse anymore, just ashes of burned bones.”
“How can you say that!” Mizuki-san yells while the edges of his mouth bubble.
“I’m just stating the facts.” Sakurako-san answers calmly, while Shiyouko-san quietly giggles with an elegant facial expression.

“Well… I’d like to say something, but it’s true. That man is already beneath a grave. No matter how many times I visit, no matter how many times I talk to the grave, I will never get a reply.”
“That why… No way. You can forgive Ohara-san?!”
“I don’t mean I forgive him. But, as Sakurako-san says, dead men can’t speak. Traces of former fame are all that remain of the once living.”
“Ms. Chiyoda…?”
“So, let me be the god of silence, Harpocrates.” Ms. Shiyouko looks down, and steps away from Sakurako-san. She speaks quietly, but clearly.
“This is a house of roses. What was said under the roses will never be spoken to anyone. Hey, don’t you have roses right in front of you, too? So… so please forget everything, priest. Let’s follow the rules of the past and keep silent.”
“No way!”
“We can’t say it was an accident in the first place. He will prepare an excellent lawyer, and we don’t know if he’ll be sent to jail even if he is arrested. Still, it’ll trouble lots of people if he is arrested. Ohara-san’s Open Field Group is vital to the Northern economy. First it’ll be the Asahikawa economy, then Hokkaido’s economy will be hit hard, too.”

“You would cover up Akihito’s death over money?!” The priest’s voice is filled with anger and hatred as he yells at Shiyouko-san.
“You’re wrong. But I’m sure it’s not what my husband would want. He was a kind person. I’m sure he would choose this to protect the lives of lots of people.” Shiyouko-san answers with a cold tone.
“Besides… Because of what happened during the recession, I can’t thank Ohara-san enough. When my husband’s business failed, I had a large debt. Even the bank didn’t have any power, but Ohara-san immediately gave us a loan. I was wondering why he would do so much for us, even though there was no reward for him, and there were even losses. I thought it might have been my husband’s personality… but I’m sure it was because of love. If my husband’s ghost could talk, I’m sure he wouldn’t wish for revenge. That person… What a guy.”
“Stop! Ohara-san is a criminal! A murderer!”

I understand that it’s painful to accept truth and justice. Honestly, I don’t think Shiyouko-san’s decision is the best one. However, she shakes her head firmly.
“Even if I choose to take revenge, he won’t come back to life. For all of you, this is revenge story is just an “emotionally moving story”, but for me, it’s over already. No matter what I do, he won’t come back to life. All I can do is protect what my husband left behind.” Shiyouko-san, who is standing powerfully before us, gives off a feeling of dignity that I didn’t think could come from her slim body and innocent smile.
“Are you really going to forgive him?” Sakurako-san sighs as she speaks. The priest hits the table, knocking the Ouija board off.
“Do you care more about the money?! Don’t you think you should do the right thing?!” The priest’s voice resounds through the salon like a bell. However, in this room, there is no medium, and no divine power. Nobody agrees with his words.

“Why… Aren’t we friends, Mizuki-san?”
“… No. I’m friends with Chiyoda-san, who died.” Kohashi-san nods moderately at the priest, who is taken aback.
“Sorry, but I can’t let that video be shown to the public. It will ruin Ohara. It will hurt Chiyoda-san’s past at the same time. There’s no possible other means, it’s unreasonable… Here, let’s hear what Ms. Chiyoda has to say.”
“I’m really sorry,” the priest and Mizuki-san say as they bows their heads.
“Such a thing… Isn’t something God can forgive.”
“No. It isn’t God that can’t forgive you. Together, with that fraudulent board. You’re only pretending to speak the words of God. It’s like they say, a lie has no legs. In fact, God has no ghost, legs, arms, mouth – and of course, no heart, either.”

Sakurako-san picks up the ouija board while laughing. She straightens the corner and puts it back in front of the priest. She picks up the planchette from below the table and looks through it. The black, heart shaped planchette with a white line down the center makes a shocking impact.

“You’re wrong! I am!”

“No, I understand. You don’t want revenge for my husband, you want to condemn him out of jealousy… You will blame a spirit, surrender to the police – all so you can compensate for your crimes. When you made the spirit of my husband say he hates you, you were targeting yourself… You really loved my husband.” From Shiyouko-san’s sad eyes, and the priest’s lips, sobs overflow.

“I want to rob him of his peace of mind, so he will fear death for the rest of his life. I wanted to take revenge on the person who murdered the person I love – I want to destroy Ohara-san out of jealousy. Not for my husband, but for myself.” Shiyouko-san puts her hand on the priest’s shoulder, and kindly, gently strokes his back, bringing her lips to his ear. "-But I am Akihito-san’s wife. Not you.”
“Wh…”
Without waiting for the priest to respond, Shiyouko-san raises her lips, and stands on her chair. She looks around at everyone and says, “please listen to me” with a strict tone.

“I’m saying this in Chiyoda’s name. Let’s hide under the roses. He died from an accident. There is no video. Good luck.”
“O-okay.” Mizuki-san and Kohashi-san nod. In my confusion, I nod, too. I can’t refuse, she sounds too demanding.
“Now that you’ve all forgotten, he can go back to sitting on God’s lap. I’m sure he’d rather be remembered by the happy times, rather than revenge.” Shiyouko-san says with a strong tone. The priest drops his gaze, and mutters while his face turns pale.
“…Why?”
She looks down, as tears pass over her cheeks.
“Akihito-san used to talk about you all the time… you must have been a truly wonderful wife. But why would you say something like that? Why are you trying to protect the man who killed him?”
“It’s because of my own philosophy.” The priest says in a hushed voice. Before Shiyouko-san can answer, Sakurako-san speaks sharply. Sakurako-san cuts in again… The priest clicks his tongue to express his discontent.

“From what I understand…”
“I know. Actually, you didn’t understand her, did you? Besides, I would like to ask, but how can you say that Ohara killed Mr. Chiyoda?”
“That’s because he ran away. If he wasn’t the murderer, he wouldn’t have escaped.” The priest snorts as he speaks. It’s a reasonable thing to say, but also an irritating mixed answer. However, Sakurako-san closes her eyes and lets out a detestable laugh.
“Would it be? He’s a human being. Even the innocent fear being suspected. Choosing to escape is unavoidable.”
“But if he’s really innocent-“
“Think for a moment. There’s still evidence left after you commit a crime. But what about if you’re innocent? How can you have proof that you didn’t do something? If you haven’t done anything, there wouldn’t be any proof in the first place. How can you prove you’re innocent without ending up with false charges?” This time, it seems the priest doesn’t have a response. His lips tremble.

“He probably didn’t even know that video exists. He probably thought it was a disadvantageous situation.”
“B-but that’s only your opinion!”
“Your objection is correct. In the end, since Mr. Chiyoda and Ohara aren’t here, no one knows the truth. Except you, of course.” Sakurako-san says, the priest glaring at her. The priest has a certain anger in his eyes. I hurry to get between him and Sakurako-san. I was sure I was going to be hit, but the priest looks hurt for a moment. Perhaps something caught his eye, or maybe it was the reflection in the window glass. He soon starts to shake with anger again.

“Even if it means I go to hell, I came here prepared to correct Ohara’s crime. No matter what you say, if Ohara hadn’t been there, Akihito-san wouldn’t have died! We absolutely shouldn’t listen to Ms. Chiyoda’s decision!” The priest balls up a fist, his stiff glove making a sound like a scream. He looks at Shiyouko-san again. She moves a bit for a moment, then looks straight at the priest. The priest looks away first.
“Is that all you’re hiding? How can you look like you understand, but say such terrible things? After all… you were only a wife for appearances’ sake. To you husband, you’re just a sinful beast that wants money!” The priest shouts. Shiyouko-san raises her hand, but never swings down.
“…Don’t worry about the cost to repair the window, Mr. Priest. Please be careful on your way home.” Ms. Shiyouko smiles as she leaves the salon. Only the sound of the priest’s screams echo through the salon.

Part 7

The Nishijima couple delivered 5 blooming roses that give off a thick scent in the passenger seat of the car.
“What, are you angry?”
“Not particularly… I’m just wondering if I’m really fine with this.”
“Fine with what?”
“Everything!”
“What do you mean ‘everything’?”
“Just everything! What Ohara-san did, and you made a mess of the séance! Even the priest was a villain! There’s also Shiyouko-san making the agreement to forget everything! Even though we know Shiyouko-san is upset, we didn’t do anything!” I answer in rapid succession, without hiding my irritation. Sakurako-san lets out a loud laugh.
“We’re not going to talk about this. You and I are outsiders.”
“That’s true, but… I don’t think the priest’s revenge was a mistake. I do think that, but… a priest being in a relationship with a married man… that kind of relationship isn’t a good thing. But should Ohara-san receive some kind of judgement?”

Sakurako-san narrows her eyes and snorts. “Hey, boy. Who decided that there must be a single conclusion?”
“Because-“
“There are also 24 ribs. What’s one necessary conclusion for this?”

“There has to be something long, like a spine, to support them! That should be the correct answer!”
“Not a spine, the correct answer is the vertebrae. Although vertebrae are useful, just one isn’t It’s made up of 7 cervical vertebrae, 12 thoracic, 5 of both lumbar and sacral vertebrae, and 4 caudal vertebrae – a total of 33 bones.” Sakurako-san answers.

I want to say something, but I can’t organize my thoughts. I switch the car radio to a music station that’s less disagreeable. From by Sakurako-san’s favourite band, Shiki Mk-II, my favourite song is the one that says “Jack the Ripper” in the middle of it. Sakurako-san yells “Why did you do that!” at me.
“…Please don’t think everything in the world is the same as bones.”
“They are the same. Bones are the same as life.”
“Did your uncle say that?”
“No. A gift shop in New Zealand said that.”
“What?”
“It seems he was a master of bone carving until he got cataracts. You have to face the bone, then-“
“That’s enough!” Sakurako-san seems to be starting her bone lecture again, so I hurry to turn the radio back on.
“Tear-it-up!” That phrase is her favourite. She seems to love those kinds of songs.

“…Boy, are you right handed?”
“What?”
“Which one is your dominant arm?”
“Right, but…”
“I see. Naoe is left handed.”
“Huh…?”
Sakurako-san speaks suddenly while the MC is talking between songs. I know Ariwara-san is left handed, but… what does she mean? I think about it to myself.

“When he was a child, he thought being left handed was bad. When he used chopsticks with your left hand, they’d be taken away. By the time he was in middle school, both seemed useable, do you understand? When he was young, he thought being left handed was “evil”. However, Naoe’s nephew, who is 8 years old this year, seems to be left handed. He uses chopsticks and scissors with his left hand. Nobody blames him. That’s how it seems to be going for now.”
“It’s not a particularly bad thing to be left handed, is it?”
“That’s right. However, there’s a twenty year difference.” I notice her intention, and it fires up my irritation again.
“… Then you’re saying that murder isn’t a bad thing if it’s been a few years, Sakurako-san?”
“I didn’t say anything that extreme. I was just wondering how long you’ll think it’s black and white.”
“Is that so?”

When I try to think about what's right, I'm still a child. As Shiyouko-san made her decision, I didn't think it was a mistake.
"Besides, I guess Ohara is really going to be arrested. Ms. Shiyouko has very deep feeling, as I'm sure you can tell. She decided that he shouldn't be arrested – it's not good that she convinced herself of that. That isn't something that we should just say at random. You should forget about it, too." Even if she says that, I'm not convinced. I look out the window and sigh. Even though it's summer, the wind is cold tonight. The white cloud from my sigh blocks my vision for a moment.

"…Naoe seems to have some free time tomorrow. Why don't the three of us go out for sushi?" Looking at my face, she tries to comfort me. Apparently she thinks that giving me food will put me in a good mood… I guess it can't be helped.
"…Even so, you only realized he was a priest because of his collar."
"Is that so… To tell you the truth, I've met him before."
"Huh?! It wasn't just good insight?!" I unintentionally raise my voice, while Sakurako-san laughs.
"Last year, on a day that Naoe and I promised to meet. A salesperson called out to me while I was waiting for him at the station. The priest suddenly appeared while I was trying to stay calm, and drove them away with his preaching and sophistry. It seems he's completely forgotten about it."
"Please stop talking that way. He helped you? He seems to be a good person."
"Is that so?"
"He just wanted to protect something important to him. You may not know that, since you don't care about love, justice, and faith, Sakurako-san." As usual, my anger doesn't get across to Sakurako-san as such. Sakurako-san nods quietly, then, with a cute face, laughs mischievously at me.
"I may say things like that, but I still still possess what makes someone a decent human being. Depending on their surroundings and interests, some people mistakenly think they're excellent, when they are actually far from it. The lower two thirds of the upper lip are difficult to break, due to the cartilage, but the nasal bone is very rigid and easy to break. Stubborn humans are the easily breakable bone."
What do I even say? I really think. I can't think of any way to deny it.

Final part

Several days later, the news about Mr. Ohara sent a wave through Hokkaido. It seems Father York took the video to the police, after all. He sent it to the media at the same time. He took measures so that Mr. Ohara couldn't use his assets to get out of his sentence. Eventually it was enough to leave the cheap magazines, and started to make headlines in Hokkaido economic magazines. It has developed into a huge incident, resulting in a severe blow to the business world, causing a chain of bankruptcies. As Mizuki-san said, there's too much evidence of corruption in that video to make it public. It seems that the late Chiyoda-san wasn't a bad person.

Nevertheless, the right thing isn't always right in this world, like Father York's choice. Mr. Ohara escaped being charged with an intent to kill, but ended up being charged for neglecting to call an ambulance and abandonment, and resigned from his job.

That stoic, tyrannical manager, Mr. Ohara, who was responsible for the entire Northern economy, lost everything he has built up over the decades with the momentum of rolling down a slope. He lost his life in his house the day before appearance day. His suicide note contains only words of apology. It seems that Father York's revenge was accomplished, but he also lost something important.

Mizuki-san also quit the city council, and Kohashi-san decided not to move forward with her theatre company. Although she didn't break up the company, the next production was given to a different director. Every time I hear their names on the news, pain rushes into my heart. After being elected, Mizuki-san was always gallantly riding his bicycle, but now he's running a suspicious-looking health food store.

The mass media visited Shiyouko-san every day, causing her body to break with anxiety. The rose garden also closed. That rose ice cream, lost forever, will never be able to enter my mouth again. I wonder if I have to keep the words spoken beneath the rose a secret…

I heard that Father York has left Japan, and is not living abroad. It seems he was stripped of his priesthood, and exiled from the Catholic Church. I don't know if his accusation was from an honest desire for justice, he couldn't bear to hide Chiyoda-san's death anymore, or as Ms. Shiyouko said, an act of jealousy. Regardless of the many people that are unhappy about it, Mr. Akihito Chiyoda's death is brought to light. At that expense, I wonder what Father York is thinking now.

The only person who was helped is Ms. Shiyouko, who went to the hospital, seems surprisingly lively. When we enter the hospital room, she welcomes us with the same innocent smile as when I first saw her.
"When I'm discharged from the hospital and calm down, I'm thinking of starting various things. First of all, mountain climbing. Akihito-san once told me that when he retires, we should try mountain climbing together. He was in the mountain climbing club in university." The way Shiyouko-san blushes a bit when she laughs makes her seem a bit child-like.

"Well, he always said he wanted to show me the beautiful scenery of the Daisetsuzan mountain range. I always said that mountain climbing seems hard, so I never agreed… Somehow the scenery seemed very important to him, so I guess I should go."
"That's good. I go mountain climbing with my grandfather sometimes. If it's Mount Kurodake, you can use the rope way lift, so even a beginner will be fine as long as your equipment is good."
"If you give me a call, I'd love to accompany you." Shiyouko-san says with a delighted face. I agree wholeheartedly.
"Really? Send a letter when you want to make your mountain girl debut, and stay safe."
"Don't worry. Nowadays, lots of girls much older than me go mountain climbing."

As we talk and laugh, the rose that decorates her bedside sways, and the petals begin to fall. In this moment, I feel like I'm able to see Mr. Akihito smiling beside Ms. Shiyouko for a second.

Epilogue

"On the way home from the airport, I happened to find this on the side of the road. It seems that it hasn't been dead for even an hour yet when I saw it. I disassembled it on spot, loaded it up, and put it into the drum by myself. It was hard work. They're my bones. Of course, that's just a figure of speech, my-"
"No, you don't need to explain any further." Sakurako-san is talkative and in a good mood, even after putting the dead body of a deer into that drum filled with boiling water in her garden. I'm suddenly overcome with fatigue and a feeling that I wasted my energy trying to rein her back in.She's sometimes like this, even though she's a beautiful person, a high-class lady, and has such a nice smile.

"It's a 140kg Hokkaido sika. The horns are quite nice. It'll make a splendid specimen. It's hard to organize large animals, but imagining the completed specimen… I'm so excited."
"I understand. Let's go get some tea." In cases like this, it's best to keep her mouth closed with something sweet. Since I can't make tea very well, I brought some hot chocolate as a treat. To my surprise, Sakurako-san says, "it's wonderful!"
Sakurako-san doesn't seem to know it's instant hot chocolate. You just add some hot water and Swiss Miss, then you have the miracle hot chocolate.

"That's it, this taste!" Is Sakurako-san, who loves sweet things like hot chocolate, really delighted? I just stopped by an import food store and bought a package for her, then added hot water. When she stayed in the United States, it seems her host family grandmother made sweet hot chocolate that tasted similar to this. I don't know if it's the same kind, or if all American instant hot chocolate tastes like this, but Sakurako-san is pleased, so I feel good, too.

"By the way, don't you like coffee?" Sakurako-san looks at me suspiciously, knowing that hot chocolate is too sweet for me.
"I don't know if I'd say like… but don't you feel like an adult when you drink it?"
"Coffee, huh?"
"…When I was a child and went to stay at my friend's house, I'd see my friend's dad in the morning. I thought it was cool to wear a suit and drink black coffee."

If you're trying to be like an adult, wouldn't smoking or drinking alcohol be more adult-like? My mother said I shouldn't do something bad for my body just to look mature. Coffee is supposed to wake you up… I longed to be an adult who could delicately drink black coffee for a while.

"It's because you said something disgusting like the smell of coffee and the smell of a corpse come from the same ingredient."
"It's true. I don't know how you can drink something bitter like that."

She likes to simmer corpses of animals in a pot, and I don't understand that… I think that, but of course I won't say it, because this house is a sanctuary of white bone. Slowly looking around at the dull walls and on the furniture, there's wooden cases with the bones of fish and small animals, with plenty of standing skeletons as well. A comfortable world of silence.

I close my eyes and sigh while smelling Sakurako-san's hot chocolate Although I have something I wanted to talk about, I'll just save it for later. It's as if time doesn't flow in this house.

"It's should be a little sweeter." After drinking about a third of the hot chocolate, she tells me it's unsatisfactory. I grin and laugh.
"Since it's for you, I came prepared for you to say that." I take a bottle the colour of bones out of my bag, full of marshmallows.
"Oh! Wow!" Sakurako-san's eyes sparkle as she gets closer to me. I'm glad she's pleased.
They're high class marshmallows that costed 900 yen for the bottle, even though there's only 12 of them. I'd like to try some, too.

"Ah-" Sakurako-san makes a delighted sound as I open the bottle lid. She grabs a plump, fluffy, round lump and tosses it in her mouth.
"Wait a minute! That's too much! Have some restraint! Ah! Stop!"
Sakurako-san throws four more marshmallows into her hot chocolate, while I try to stop her in vain. Only half of them are left in an instant.
"Haa…" Sakurako-san sighs happily, without anything else to say.

"Honestly…" I put two marshmallows in my mug, annoyed. I imagine the sweet taste and begin to regret it even more… Well, I guess it's fine. When I look at Sakurako-san's smiling face, my anger fades as usual. Although the hot days are not yet here, this warm hot chocolate makes us feel that warmth all year round in this quiet, restful mansion. Sitting in a chair, smiling at Sakurako-san, I poke the rabbit skeleton on the sideboard with my finger. It makes a satisfying clacking sound, while we both laugh.